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"BEAU" RAND

Eleanor's pulses leaped in terror . . . repulsive passion lay naked in his eyes

[*Page 266*]

"BEAU" RAND

BY

CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

AUTHOR OF

"DRAG" HARLAN, THE TRAIL HORDE,
THE BOSS OF THE LAZY Y, ETC.

FRONTISPIECE BY P. V. E. IVORY

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"BEAU" RAND

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CHAPTER I

A MAN SPREADS POISON

STANDING, though resting one shoulder against a door-jamb of the bunkhouse, Amos Seddon watched his daughter. The shoulder that rested against the door-jamb was slightly drooped, the left arm hanging limply; the thumb of the right hand was hooked in the cartridge belt that encircled Seddon's waist. That hand, too, was limp, and there was a glum pout on the man's lips.

His thoughts were not pleasant, for they ran to Beaudry Rand, his neighbor, with a virulent savagery that made him ache to use the gun, whose stock lay so near to his limp fingers. Some day, he told himself, he *would* use the gun on Beaudry Rand.

It was not that Rand had done anything to him, particularly; he hated Rand for the things that Rand had *not* done. That paradox was vague and mysterious to those who did not know; but the torture of it was that Seddon feared some persons — besides Rand — *did*

know. And there was not a time when Seddon rode into Ocate that he did not seem to feel there were many of the town's citizens who were secretly laughing at him. And he suspected that those citizens in possession of the secret were wondering why he did not take the boy from Rand.

To be sure, he had kept his affair with the dance-hall girl a secret — so far as any affair of that character may be kept a secret — and he knew he should not have deserted the girl when he did. But the dread and fear of discovery had seized him, and he had taken the stage to Lazette, and from Lazette he had been whisked westward to San Francisco by rail, where he had spent two weeks trying to convince himself that the girl alone was to blame.

On his return to Ocate he found that the girl had died and that the boy had been adopted by Beaudry Rand.

For a while after returning to Ocate Seddon had wondered if the girl had talked. But if she had talked, the citizens of the town were not eager to disseminate the burden of her last words; and as the days passed Seddon began to believe the girl had said nothing. And then one day, meeting Beaudry Rand on the river trail, Seddon discovered that the girl *had* talked — to Rand.

For Rand's words and manner had been most convincing. The picture Rand made that day was still vivid

in Seddon's mind; even now the reviewing of the scene bloated Seddon's face poisonously.

"Seddon, I want a straight talk with you!" had been Rand's greeting. The mirthless smile on the man's lips, and the glittering contempt in his eyes warned Seddon that the other knew of his guilt.

Seddon's bluster had no effect. "She's a liar if she's mixed me up in that deal!" he sneered. "Why, hell's fire! If a man was to be blamed——"

Rand's smile grew saturnine.

"Not that it makes any difference," he interrupted. "I just want you to know—that I know. An' I want you to know this! I'm takin' the boy—understand? He's mine because I adopted him—no one else wantin' to take the responsibility. He ain't to blame because he's here; an' I'm goin' to keep him from knowin' that his daddy is a sneak an' a coyote! I reckon that's all. You can travel when you're ready!"

But that conversation did not end the incident—for Seddon. For so long as Beaudry Rand was alive—if Rand was the only person the dance-hall girl had taken into her confidence—just so long would Seddon be in danger of discovery. For Rand, despite his declared intention of keeping the incident a secret, *might* talk.

And, though Seddon's wife had died some years before and he had no concern for public opinion in Ocate, he did

not want his daughter to know — the girl he was now watching — who stood in the knee-high sagebrush that swept away from the front of the ranchhouse; her tall, lissom figure clear-cut in the white light of the morning, its gracefully rounded lines revealed by the pressure of the slight breeze that whipped her skirts; her hair in a tangle of ravishing disorder; her cheeks suffused with the bloom of health; her eyes drinking in the beauty of the vast, green world that stretched from her feet across the interminable miles to a raggedly picturesque horizon.

His daughter!

Seddon did not want *her* to know. This was the beginning of her fourth day at home — at the Bar S — which she had not seen in as many years — and during those four days Seddon had delicately and subtly probed her character — to discover traits that had both pleased and awed him.

First, he had found a sturdy, uncompromising moral structure with no flexibility toward error. He knew she had inherited that attitude from her mother. And he had found her with an astonishingly clear vision of life and a conception of the meaning of life that had rather startled him, so greatly was it at variance with his own ideas.

"I know, Daddy," she had said when he had attempted to impart some of the wisdom of his experience to her,

"if a person has clean thoughts there will be little danger of error."

Seddon had not gone very far in that direction; the girl's clear eyes and straight gaze disconcerted him—made him think of the dance-hall girl and the boy—his boy!

After that conversation with his daughter, Seddon became convinced that if she should learn of his escapade with the dance-hall girl she could never give him that affection and respect for which he yearned.

And this morning as he stood watching the girl, he considered Beaudry Rand and the paradox. The things Rand had *not* done were glaringly apparent. Rand had not treated him fairly. Rand had no business to interfere, for it was not Rand's affair. And even if Rand had interfered he should have consulted Seddon before he had done anything. No matter what he had done, the boy was his, and he should have had a word to say about his future.

Rand had not consulted him; Rand had neglected to consider him at all. And Rand would hold the threat of exposure over him, he knew; and if Rand should meet his daughter, and become acquainted with her; if a contrary fate should throw them together upon terms of intimacy—Seddon's brain rioted with passion, and his thoughts became abysmal.

...t *could* happen. A man and a girl — neighbors! But it must not happen. Seddon paled as he left the bunkhouse door and walked to where his daughter stood.

He stood for a time behind her, looking at her, watching her in silence as, unconscious of his presence, she looked far out over the rolling sweep of country at the dim and ragged horizon.

"Ellie!" he said softly.

The girl turned, and flashed a smile at him.

"It's great to be home, Daddy!" Elation and a sheer joy of living were in her eyes, in her swelling breast, and in the glow of her cheeks as she stood erect, with head thrown back, her body rigid, inhaling the sage-scented breeze.

"You like it, eh?" he said with a smile, though with no enthusiasm.

"Like it? I love it! I feel that I have been cheated out of four years of my life!"

"No one cheats himself by goin' to school. It's made a woman of you, Ellie."

"I *feel* older, Daddy," she laughed. And then she laid an affectionate hand on his shoulder. "Do you think I am a woman now?"

"Certain."

"And 'Ellie,'" she smiled deprecatingly, "is a girl's name — the name of a young — a very young — girl.

And nicknames—" She paused and met Seddon's gaze.

"Eleanor," surrendered Seddon. "I reckon I'll have to get used to it." He grinned at her. "This is different—after Denver?" he suggested.

"Different? Oh, yes. But it hasn't changed, Daddy!" She gripped his shoulder hard and wheeled him around so that he faced the river trail. Both could see it, winding around low hills, up rises, disappearing into depressions, reappearing again, narrowing as it receded, and finally vanishing altogether into the haze of distance.

"It's miles to that point—where you can't see the trail any more," she said. "How many miles? I have forgotten."

"Twelve." His face hardened, for the trail ran through Beaudry Rand's ranch, the Three Bar.

"Oh, yes!" Her eyes glowed. "I always loved that trail! That big wide stretch there"—indicating a broad, black expanse of timberland that seemed to swallow the trail near the point about which they had been talking—"is the wood you always warned me against, isn't it? Where you said the timber wolves prowled? Are there really wolves in there, or did you just tell me that to keep me from going there—when you wanted me to stay at home?"

"There's wolves in there all right," he said. "There always was. I've lost a good many calves there." His

eyes became savage, his face reddened with passion. "There's worse than wolves around there now," he said gruffly; "there's Beau Rand!"

"'Beau' Rand?" she said, looking sharply at him, and noting the passion in his eyes. "Is that the name of a man or — or a monster?"

"He claims to be a man, I reckon." Seddon's glance toward the timber was baleful. "He owns the Three Bar now — Halsey sold out to him four years ago. Just after your mother died — an' just before you left to go to school at Denver."

"Beau Rand!" The girl repeated the name, her brows furrowing thoughtfully. "Yes, it must have been — but I don't seem to remember. But what an odd name! Beau!" A twinkle of amusement was in her eyes as she looked at her father; and her lips curved with mockery.

"Beau!" she repeated. "Why, that name suggests a man who is popular with women, doesn't it? A fop; a fashion-plate male; a Beau Brummel who wears spats and a high hat, displays enormous expanses of linen; wears lace cuffs and a wig, and is saturated with perfume. A beau, Father! Oh, it can't be that the Three Bar has descended to that!"

"The Three Bar has descended — if that's the way to say it," declared Seddon, with a malignant grin. It pleased him to discover that Eleanor was already prejudiced

against Rand—her attitude would make the task of poisoning her against the man much easier.

"Eleanor," he continued, "the Three Bar ain't what it used to be. Not since this man, Rand, bought it. An' the country ain't what it used to be—so far as that goes. There never was no trouble—you know that. Me an' Halsey an' Link Compton always got along. But lately things is different. The river's taken to goin' dry in the middle of the season. For the last three years there's never been water enough. Last year she was plumb dry durin' the whole summer. The Two Link—that's Link Compton's ranch—an' the Bar S suffered a heap. There wasn't any water except in that big natural basin in the river just opposite the Three Bar ranchhouse. There's always plenty there, for that's a deep basin, an' it gets the last trickle of water that runs down the upper gorge."

"And this Beau—this Rand—wouldn't permit you and Compton to water your stock there?" The girl's eyes flashed with indignation.

"As for that," admitted Seddon, grudgingly, "Rand let us water our stock there. But he was mighty sullen about it." He told the lie so glibly that the girl, watching him closely, had no doubt of the truth of the statement.

"But that ain't neither here nor there," went on Seddon. "Rand don't raise near the number of cattle we raise; an' me an' Compton offered to buy him out at a

figure that would have paid him. He grinned like a hyena an' told us he'd sell out when he got damn good an' ready. Them's his very words."

"Well," said the girl hesitatingly, "I don't know that you could blame him for not selling. But he shouldn't have been so stingy about the water. He must be a grouch!"

"He's worse," said Seddon eagerly. He saw that he had not made a strong case against Rand. "He's worse. Rand hadn't been at the Three Bar very long when someone took to robbin' the stage. An' about that time cattle thieves began to rustle stock around there. Cattle an' horses. There's been hell to pay! The worst of it is nobody can get a line on who's doin' it. Compton an' some more of the ranchers has organized a vigilance committee, which is nosin' around quite considerable. But that ain't helped none—the stealin' of cattle an' horses, an' the robbin' of the stage is still goin' on."

"Compton suspects Rand?" asked the girl.

"Who else is there to suspect!" demanded Seddon. "Stealin' didn't start until Rand bought the Three Bar an' brought a lot of low-down guys there to work for him. They're a hell-raisin' bunch, Eleanor; an' if I was you I'd steer clear of Rand—an' I'd stay away from that timber. For there's worse than wolves prowlin' around there!"

Seddon had aroused the girl's interest; and he could

plainly see that she believed him, for her eyes were glowing with indignation and resentment — and there was a flush on her cheeks and a glint in her eyes which told Seddon that the spirit of resistance to Rand's supposed outlawry was strong within her.

"If they can prove that he is doing those things they should run him out of the country!" she said.

Seddon grinned coldly. "There'll be worse happen to him when they prove up on him!" he declared.

The girl relaxed, and a little shiver ran over her. Tales of violence in which rustlers and other thieves had suffered had not failed to reach her ears.

But Seddon's recital had aroused in her a certain interest in Rand; while his warning about there being "worse than wolves" in the timber near the Three Bar had not affected her in the least. She would go to the timber whenever she took a notion to go — fear of Rand and his men would not deter her.

She spoke a thought that was uppermost in her mind:

"I should like to see that man, Rand. Don't you think that a man who gives so much attention to his personal appearance would hesitate to do the things he is suspected of doing? Beau! Why, Father; it doesn't seem possible!"

"I reckon it ain't his clothes so much," said Seddon. "There ain't nothin' remarkable about them. It's the way

he wears them, most likely; an' his name. His real name's Beaudry Rand. Beaudry's too heavy a name to go carryin' around in this country, an' so the boys begun shortenin' it to Beau.

"An' he don't like it none, at that. Call him Beau to his face an' you can see his eyes sort of chill. He'll stand for it all right, but there'll be a grin on his face that'll make you think of a tiger that's got you into a corner. He's a mean, ornery cuss, an' no mistake!"

She laughed, entirely unimpressed by her father's deprecatory words. Never in her life had she formed an opinion of another upon the basis of a verbal description. And despite Seddon's excellent counterfeit of sincerity, she had detected in his manner a bitter vindictiveness that did not seem to be warranted by the declaration that Rand was merely suspected of being a thief.

She knew her father as a man of strong character, of strong passions that boiled, unrestrained, in him; that he was ruled by his prejudices; and that in this case Rand had undoubtedly aroused his enmity because of his attitude over the question of the precious water.

"What is the man — Rand — like, Father?" she asked.

He saw the gleam of mischief in her eyes — the tolerant, half-incredulous smile on her lips. These signs told him though he had made the case against Rand as strong as he could, she was still in doubt. More — he could see

that she had not been at all impressed with Rand's viciousness — or that if she was impressed, she did not intend to permit her impressions to rule her. She neither believed nor disbelieved her father; she had formed no opinion — Seddon's recital had made no impression upon her, except to arouse her curiosity.

Seddon betrayed a flash of the malignance that seized him whenever he thought of Rand.

"He's a skinny, ugly gawk with pink hair an' an eye like a fish!" he declared. "He's tall an' awkward, with a pigeon chest an' a woman's waist. He's got a nose like an eagle's beak an' a grin like a sneakin' tomcat! That's Rand — Beau Rand!"

"Why, Daddy!" she said, reprovingly, frankly mocking him.

"Look here, Ellie!" said Seddon, earnestly. "He's done me dirt, an' I don't like him. Mebbe he ain't just the buzzard I've described him; but I don't want you to get thick with him — he's poison, sure enough!"

"Thick!" she said. "Why, Father!"

"That's all right, Ellie; I didn't mean that," he said as he placed an arm about her waist and led her toward the house.

CHAPTER II

A TIMBER WOLF

AMOS SEDDON said no more to his daughter about Beaudry Rand. Seddon had caught certain expressions in the girl's eyes during his first talk about the man, and those expressions had warned him that he might talk too much, and thus arouse the girl's suspicions.

Already, he divined from the way she had looked at him several times, she was wondering why he exhibited so much feeling toward Rand. He didn't want her to ask questions, for some of them might have embarrassed him. And so for two days following the talk about the Three Bar owner, he did not again refer to him.

Besides, various activities engaged Seddon's attention. It was the time of the late spring round-up, and Seddon was compelled to spend much of his time with the Bar S outfit. He wanted Eleanor to accompany him on some of his rides, to watch the men at work, but range work was no novelty to the girl, and she smilingly refused.

However, she spent little of her time at the ranchhouse. Her favorite horse — which she had ridden much before leaving the ranch for Denver, four years before — she found had been pasturing during most of the interval of

her absence, and when one morning she went down to the far pasture and looked at him through the rails of the fence, she saw that he had grown fat and slow and old.

She called to him—the old, familiar and peculiar whistle with which she had summoned him years before. He answered, whinnying, approaching the fence haltingly; and when he stuck his muzzle between the rails she patted it and talked to him, renewing their friendship.

But she did not ride him. From the horse corral near the stable she selected a gray, rangy beast, which her father had pointed out to her, recommending him as "reliable." "Silver," Seddon had named him.

Silver *was* reliable. It did not take the girl long to discover that. She knew horses, and during her rides she tested the gray animal in various ways; and at last patted him admiringly and confided into his ears that he would "do."

The four-year interval of her absence had not made the far timber less alluring; nor had she taken her father's warning seriously. She had never taken the wolf story literally—it had been a childhood bogey by which both her father and mother had tried to keep her from exploring the timber.

For, despite their warnings, she had gone there many times, impressed by its vastness, awed by the solemn silence that reigned there; a religious reverence stealing

over her whenever she traversed its majestic aisles, with the towering, tapering trees, like cathedral spires, thrusting into the azure blue above.

On this morning — three days after Seddon had talked to her about Beaudry Rand, she watched her father mount his horse and ride away. Shortly after he vanished westward to join the outfit she saddled Silver and headed him toward the river trail.

Familiar landmarks came into view as she rode. She did not travel fast, for there were some things she wished to see — a shady nook at the edge of a sheer butte that fringed the river, where she had spent many hours; a "hole" in the river, far down in a shallow cañon — where she had bathed, with no danger of discovery; and other well-remembered places with which were connected incidents that were still vivid in her recollection.

This tour of memory-exploration took time. It was nearly noon when she reached the edge of the timber, and she smilingly reflected that she had consumed several hours in riding about twelve miles.

Memories thrilled her as she entered the timber — following a faint trail that she remembered well — for she had not seen the timber in four years. Those four years, she saw, had not brought much change in the aspect of the forest. Over here, as she entered a narrow aisle and sent Silver loping along it, descended the atmosphere of

mystery that had always encompassed her — the ling
ing, whispering, sighing voices of the trees, bearin
threat or a promise — she had never been able to de
which.

She spent some hours in the forest; though she pen
trated no farther than she had gone many times in the past. For she rode only those trails she remembered — cattle paths, made by refractory steers that insisted upon betraying yearnings to revert to type.

She reflected that some of the most marvelous profanity she had ever heard had been provoked among the Bar S men by the predilection of some range steers for the mazes and tangle of timber. When they went in — as some of them would — the men had to get them out.

It was a vast forest. Eleanor had never ridden far enough eastward to reach its edge in that direction; though she had almost attained its northern radius — and she always entered the timber from the south.

And she did not attempt today to reach the eastern limits; she rode as far as she had ridden other times, and twice almost lost herself — for most of the trails she had known were overgrown with wild brush and carpeted with the fallen leaves of past seasons, and she had some trouble to find them.

She was in no hurry. Her father, she knew, would not return until late in the evening — probably not until

tomorrow, for she had heard him tell the straw-boss the distance to where the outfit was going was tty far." So she had no fear that he would discover re she had gone.

As for that she was nearly twenty, and the spirit of independence in her had grown and flourished during her four years' absence. She had always been self-reliant. Not aggressively self-reliant — she disliked a mannish woman. She preferred to feel that she was merely confident — confident of her ability to take care of herself. Certainly she had spirit enough to demonstrate that trait — her trip to the timber despite her father's warning proved that!

She smiled, remembering her father's gravity.

"Worse than wolves," he had said; "there's Beau Rand!"

Her smile grew. Beau Rand, according to her father, might be some prehistoric monster roaming the timber, seeking to devour pygmy humans — herself especially! She laughed aloud.

Later, reaching a small clearing where some wild flowers grew, delicately tinted, their stems frail and transparent, she dismounted and began to gather them.

Engrossed in the task, the bunch of tinted beauties in her hand growing larger and larger, she spent much time in the clearing — more time than she realized. For when,

after a while, she stood erect, satisfied with the size of the fragrant bunch in her hands, she discovered that Silver was nowhere to be seen!

She gasped, astonishment confounding her, until she remembered that she had forgotten to trail the reins over Silver's head!

Every range horse expected that; no range horse would stand if the reins were not trailed, unless he had been carefully trained otherwise. They were taught, during their training days, to fear the rope, and no range horse would walk far with the reins at his hoofs. She had forgotten that; her four years' absence from the Bar S had robbed her of that most essential, and very common, knowledge.

She dropped the flowers — for the stern business of getting out of the timber would fully occupy her mind and energy for some time, if Silver had strayed far — and ran to the western edge of the clearing, leaping to the trunk of a fallen tree.

From this vantage point she looked southward — toward the Bar S — which direction the horse would naturally take had he decided to desert her. Far down a narrow aisle, fully a quarter of a mile away, she saw a gray shape moving among the trees.

It was Silver, idly browsing — she could see his neck slanting downward, and his tail swishing back and forth.

She gulped with thankfulness, leaped down from the fallen tree trunk, and began to run toward Silver, her face a trifle pale and her eyes filled with a wistful expression.

But she had not taken more than three or four steps toward the horse when she halted and stood rigid, catching her breath with a shrill gasp; her face whitening, her eyes filled with horror. For not more than a dozen paces from her, and directly in the narrow aisle through which she must go to reach Silver, stood a huge, gray timber wolf, his mouth open, his jaws agape, slavering; his eyes flaming with a fire which, she knew, was a sign of the malignant ferocity that had set him across her path.

She did not know how long she stood there, watching the great gray beast. She knew that the wolf did not move, but stood there returning her gaze, its sides heaving with its rapid breaths, its tongue hanging far out of its mouth—the fangs bared a little in a hideous, grinning smirk. It seemed to her that the animal knew of her helplessness and was mocking her, content to wait, certain that she could not escape.

She did not move—she was convinced that if she made the slightest motion the beast would leap. Nor did she permit her gaze to wander for the slightest fraction of a second from the beast's eyes. She stood that way for, it seemed, many minutes; her breath catching in her throat,

her heart pounding, and her nerves tingling with the horror of it.

And then she heard a sharp sound near — the crackling of a twig or a branch, it seemed. She saw the wolf raise its head, snap its ears erect and look past her — a little to her right. The fur on its neck bristled, as though it saw something that aroused it to a fighting resentment, or a craven, gripping fear. Then it snarled, wheeled, and leaped — away from her.

While its body was in the air the solemn silence of the forest was rent by a splitting, crashing report. The girl saw the wolf collapse in mid-air and come down limply, landing on its head and shoulders; its legs asprawl and jerking spasmodically.

She wheeled, aware that the wolf had received a death wound, to see a man on a big black horse directly behind her. He was lounging in the saddle, a smoking pistol in his right hand. There was a slight smile on his lips, and his eyes were agleam with interest and curiosity.

"You're scared, ma'am, eh?" he said in a low but distinct voice. "Well, you don't need to be — now. I reckon Mr. Lobo won't ever be any deader than he is right this minute."

Eleanor walked totteringly to the fallen tree trunk and sank to it, holding tightly to some barkless branches that projected from it to keep herself from slipping off —

for she knew that she had never been nearer to fainting than at this minute.

Her rescuer watched her with grave concern, the smile having departed. The pistol was still in his hand, and noting that she looked at it wonderingly — as though not quite certain what he intended to do next — he sheathed it — first ejecting the empty shell and replacing it with a loaded one. The pistol in the holster, he looked at her with a straight, level gaze.

"What's happened, ma'am? You sure didn't *walk* into this timber!"

She stood erect now, for she had conquered the faintness that had stolen over her, and smiled at him — though her voice quavered a little when she spoke:

"I stopped to pick some flowers and my horse strayed," she told him.

His eyes gleamed with humor. "You ain't Eastern, ma'am — I can see that. Then how ——"

"I forgot. You see, I haven't been home in four years — and I left the reins on Silver's saddle."

"Then he *would* slope," said the man; "there bein' nothin' to stop him, an' him thinkin' that mebbe you didn't need him any more. An' then — when he'd gone — old Lobo thought he'd devil you. It's likely — if you've been in the timber any time — he's been followin' you. Well, he died hungry."

"So he did," she laughed. And then seriously: "I want to thank you. I'm afraid if you hadn't come when you did—" She shivered.

He laughed lowly. "Why, I've been watchin' you for hours, ma'am," he said gravely. "Hangin' around—quite a piece away."

She flushed angrily and stood rigid, facing him. Ready to tell him what she thought of him for spying upon her, she saw a big Bar S brand on the hip of the black horse—her father's brand. And then she knew that her father had distrusted her—had been convinced that she *would* ride to the timber—and that he had set this man to watch her, to see that no harm befell her.

The man saw the resentment shining in her eyes, and his expression became apologetic—so obviously apologetic that her anger vanished and a fugitive smile twitched at the corners of her mouth. The man grinned with her—sensing her forgiveness. But instantly she frowned, determined that though the man had saved her from the wolf he should not be permitted to presume upon his service—for he had been employed to do what he had done.

She wondered, though, even while she looked straight at him with a slightly belligerent gaze—how it happened that her father had selected so striking a cowboy to stand guard over her.

He was not handsome — men were never that, she was convinced — for that would make them seem effeminate. But he was undeniably good-looking. And his steel-gray eyes, now watching her with a glint of humor in them, were also aglimmer with the light of an intelligence that was rare in cowboys she had known — those who had worked for her father, for instance.

He was tall, lithe, and muscular; he looked capable — that was the word that thoroughly described him, she thought — until she began to be affected by the atmosphere of grave and grim deliberation that seemed to envelop him.

The humor which seemed to glint his eyes was, she became convinced as she studied him, oddly mingled with malice, not vicious, but cynical — as though he was continually alert for deceit and trickery.

His gaze was highly disconcerting — she felt that were she a man she would not care to trifle with him. For in his eyes, in the way he moved, and in his attitude, was a lingering threat of cold preparedness — a readiness for anything that might happen.

However, she was indignant because he had admitted he had been watching her, and was not so deeply impressed by him as she might have been had she met him under different circumstances. She raised her chin defiantly.

"So you were watching me. Then, when you asked

me if I had *walked* here, you were merely trying to be humorous, is that it?"

His eyes twinkled. "I wasn't intendin' to tell you." His lips twitched into a smile. "But when you shivered that way, gettin' ready to faint, I just *had* to let you know that you wasn't in any great danger. You see, women ain't got much nerve, ma'am."

"Well," she said scornfully, "so long as there are men in the world I suppose women do not need nerve. I suppose you mean to infer that it was a good thing for me that a *man* happened to be near?"

"Men are sort of handy—sometimes," he grinned.

"Well," she ordered, looking coldly at him, "catch my horse, and don't stand there trying to be amusing. That is not what Father employs you for, is it?"

He bowed, smiled, kicked the black horse in the ribs, and rode down the aisle toward the point where Silver had disappeared.

The girl watched him until he could no longer be seen, and then she again seated herself on the fallen tree trunk and gazed reflectively at the dead body of the wolf.

And now that he had gone, and she was left with the memory of her experience, she realized that, even though he had been employed to watch her, he had rendered valuable service; and that he had been as delicate in his espionage as had been possible.

And he certainly was gentlemanly — for a cowboy; and — hadn't she been a little too severe? He had done what he had been ordered to do — and had done it well; and she had censured him when he deserved commendation.

So her thoughts ran, with the result that when the man reappeared a little later, leading the recreant Silver, her manner toward her rescuer was slightly more gracious. She even smiled at him when he offered to help her mount the horse. And then, when she was in the saddle, and he was lounging in his own, watching her gravely, she said:

"As long as I know you are watching me, I suppose you might as well ride with me. Have you any special orders regarding me?"

At his slow negative she resumed:

"Father warned me against going to the Three Bar. But there is still time, and I am going there. I want you to go with me. That will take the edge off Father's displeasure when he discovers I disregarded his warning. Do you know Beaudry Rand?"

A nod was her answer. It was accompanied by a swift, intent glance, as though he was speculating over her.

"Then you can introduce me!" she said, laughing. "It will be decidedly novel to be formally presented to an outlaw!"

He grinned. "I expect it will, ma'am."

She looked around, perplexity in her eyes.

"I really believe I am lost!" she said. "I have no sense of direction since — since that beast came upon me."

Silently he urged the black horse out of the clearing and sent it westward through the timber. Eleanor, after glancing sharply around, smiled, for she had not really lost her sense of direction — she had merely wanted the man to ride ahead of her so that upon him would rest the burden of finding the trail. For she was tired, though determined to go to the Three Bar — and she wanted to look at the man, for he interested her.

She did not let him get very far in advance of her — there were times when the head of her horse was at the withers of the black. But the man paid no attention to her — seemingly. He rode onward, silent, looking straight ahead; and his apparent lack of interest in her soon irritated her.

She spoke almost sharply to him at last, resentment plain in her voice:

"Are you sure you are going in the right direction?"

"Pretty sure," came the answer. Still he did not look around.

For a time the solemn silence of the forest was not broken except by the whipping tread of their horses' hoofs. Again the man's detached attitude provoked the girl to speech.

"Did Father tell you not to talk to me?" she demanded.

"No."

Silence for a hundred yards. Then—

"Do you know Beaudry Rand well?"

"Pretty well."

"Is he really an outlaw?"

"Some say he is."

"And you—what is your opinion?"

"I ain't expressin' it."

"Oh—you aren't! Well, you have one, I presume?"

"Yes."

"But you won't express it. How odd! I suppose that is because you are afraid Rand would shoot you if he heard you had talked about him?" There was much sarcasm in her voice, provoked by the man's obvious reluctance to talk with her.

He laughed, and his voice floated back to her:

"I ain't afraid of Rand shootin' me."

She believed him. But that conviction did not lessen her resentment. And she persisted, determined to make him talk.

"But Rand *is* considered a dangerous man, isn't he? That is, I mean he has the reputation of being a gunfighter—a cattle rustler, a horse thief, and a stage robber?"

"There's folks that think that about him, I reckon. Who was tellin' you?"

"My father told me," she answered. "He said that Rand was suspected of doing all those things, though there was no evidence against him. The stealing began about the time Rand bought the Three Bar. Link Compton has organized a vigilance committee to endeavor to get evidence against Rand."

This did not seem to interest her escort, for he did not answer, nor did he turn his head. When they began to approach the edge of the timber, and the trail grew wider, she spurred her horse beside his and looked furtively at him. He paid no attention to her—his attitude being that of the respectful employee whose business it was to speak when spoken to.

There was a flash of malice in her eyes—humorous malice. For he was so strikingly good-looking that she suspected he would betray condescension toward those of his fellows less generously endowed by nature. She had heard women make "cattish" remarks about other women, and she supposed men were not unlike her own sex in that regard. At least, if her escort had a weak point it was likely to be just here—and it was worth a trial.

"What do you think of Rand—his appearance, I mean. Is he good-looking or ugly?"

"I'd say he was good-lookin'," he answered, flashing a sharp glance at her.

She was disappointed, for he had not spoken the derogatory word she had expected. Also, she was resentful, for she had wanted him to exhibit a very human trait, and he had not done so.

"That is remarkable," she said.

"What is?" Again his glance rested on her — fleeting; she could not fathom it.

"That you seem to think he is good-looking. Father has a decidedly opposite opinion. Shall I tell you what Father says about him — about his appearance?"

"I ain't particular."

"No-o? Well, perhaps you have heard Father describe him. Father says"— she remembered the words well; she felt she would never forget them —"Rand is a skinny, ugly gawk, with pink hair and an eye like a fish. He's tall and awkward, with a pigeon chest and a woman's waist. He's got a nose like an eagle's beak and a grin like a sneaking tomcat! That's Rand — Beau Rand!"

She succeeded in getting a remarkable touch of her father's venom into the description, and she expected her escort to laugh. But to her astonishment and chagrin when she looked quickly at him she saw that there was no sign of emotion on his face. He might not have heard her.

"That description doesn't coincide with yours, I presume?" she asked.

"No, ma'am." And now his lips curved with a slight, mirthless smile. "I expect it wouldn't please Rand a heap, either."

"There is bad feeling between Rand and Father," she said; "that is evident. Do you know why?"

"I ain't never asked your father about it, ma'am," he answered.

She said nothing more until they reached a broad level beyond the edge of the timber, and were riding at a good pace through some tall bunch grass. Then she said:

"How old is Beaudry Rand?"

"I'd say about thirty."

They had crossed the broad level, and were loping their horses down a rocky, uneven slope that led to the river before the girl spoke again.

"Why do they call him 'Beau'?"

"That's his name, ma'am."

"Did you ever call him that?" she asked. "Because," she went on, noting the sudden flush that came into his cheeks, "Father says that whenever a man calls him Beau to his face he'll look at you like a tiger about to devour you!" She laughed. "You *must* have called him that, judging from your embarrassment — and he must have shown you that he wanted to eat you!" She leaned close to him, intensely curious. "Did you?" she asked.

"I've called him Beau."

"And what did he do?"

"Nothin'."

She straightened with a sigh. "Father said he'd 'stand' for it. If I were a man, and another man profaned my name like that, I'd certainly punish him some way. This man Rand must be a sort of spiritless fellow after all. I had hoped — when I heard about him — that he'd have more gumption."

"I reckon he's a sort of mild critter, ma'am, or he'd not stand for what's bein' said about him. But Rand ain't no trouble-hunter — if that's any use to you."

Thereafter she questioned him no further; for she had seen from the flush on his face that he must have had trouble with Rand — over the nickname, possibly — and she had no desire further to embarrass him. But her resentment over his lack of interest in her still lingered.

She dropped behind him, riding at a little distance, while they traversed the irregular slope to the edge of the deep basin, full of water, about which her father had spoken.

The basin belonged to the Three Bar — the girl recognized it, for she had ridden here many times while the Three Bar was still owned by Halsey — and she saw that what her father had said about the river was true.

When she had left the Bar S there had been considerable water in the river, but now there was a small stream of

it, barely a yard wide, trickling over its rock bed into the basin. And very little water flowed from the southerly end of the basin into the almost dry bed of the river that dropped down into the gorge that ran past the Bar S.

The two horses clattered across a shallow that skirted the basin, reached a gradual rise that began at the basin's edge, and stretched to some level land westward. When they reached the crest of the rise the girl saw the Three Bar buildings farther back, at the edge of a grove of spruce and fir-balsam and cottonwood. The buildings looked no different than they had looked when she had left the country four years before, and she had some difficulty in believing that they were now inhabited by an outlaw.

For the girl's memory was retentive, and while she was riding forward toward the ranch buildings, she kept seeing mental pictures of the Halseys — of Halsey himself, and of his girls — who had chummed with her; and of the Halsey home life — which had been gentle and ideal.

So deeply interested was she with her mental pictures, she had almost forgotten the man who had escorted her out of the timber; and she did not look up until her horse came to a halt of his own volition. Then she started and looked about her, for her escort had dismounted and was standing at the head of her horse, smiling at her.

"You'll find Beaudry Rand in the house."

She reddened; for now that she was here, and the mental pictures had vanished, she realized that she had done a bold and unconventional thing in coming.

"Why," she said; "I — I don't believe, after all, that I care to make Mr. Rand's acquaintance. I thought, perhaps, that if he should happen to be around anywhere — outside, that is — I might like to see him. But to go into the house! Can't you bring him out here?"

"The last I saw of Beaudry Rand, the outlaw, he couldn't do any walkin'," said her escort. His eyes were quizzical and mocking. No doubt he was aware of her sudden trepidation.

"Hurt — do you mean?" she asked. "Well, in any case, I shall not go in."

"Scared?" said the man, derisively, as though daring her.

Her flush deepened, and a reckless impulse seized her.

"No," she declared; "I am not scared." And she laughed at the flash of admiration that lighted the man's eyes.

Dismounting — this time trailing the reins over Silver's head — she followed the man across a broad gallery and into a big, gloomy front room which, she knew, had served the Halseys as a parlor.

Her escort halted midway in the room and pointed to a small picture on the wall — a full-length photograph of

a man in cowboy rigging, with a large, flowing mustache, and a cruel, drooping mouth.

Perplexed, she stared hard at the picture, and then at her escort.

"Why," she said coldly; "is this a hoax? I came in here to see Beaudry Rand, and you show me a photograph!"

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He looked gravely at her. "I reckon it ain't a hoax, ma'am. That is a picture of Beaudry Rand, the outlaw. Beaudry Rand, the outlaw, is dead; an' that's all he left to remember him by — exceptin' some mighty excitin' stories that folks will tell you — mostly lies, I reckon."

"But I — I thought Beaudry Rand was alive! Father said he is alive! Why," she added, standing stiffly before him, her eyes flashing, accusation in her voice; "*you* told me — as *much* as told me he was alive! And you said he was about thirty years of age!"

"Beaudry Rand, the outlaw, is dead, ma'am," he repeated gravely. "But Beaudry Rand, his son, is a heap certain that he's a whole lot alive. An' he's about thirty, too, ma'am — as I told you. An' I'd be willin' to swear that he ain't got no pink hair — unless this is pink," he added, running the fingers of one of his hands through the short, dark-brown, virile mass that covered his head.

"An' while I ain't claimin' to be vain, I ain't admittin' that I've got a pigeon chest, an' an eagle-beak nose; an'

I'm right certain I ain't no sneakin' tomcat! As for me bein' awkward, an' a lot of other things that I can't seem to remember—there bein' so much of it—why, you'll have to be the judge of that, ma'am; for you've been lookin' at me quite considerable this afternoon!"

She had started back, and now stood looking at him in dismayed astonishment.

"You!" she said; "you are Beaudry Rand?"

"I'm Beaudry Rand, ma'am," he said gently. And he stood near the center of the room, watching her with a grave smile as she backed through the door, across the porch, and to the steps. At the steps she turned, ran to Silver, mounted hurriedly, and sent the animal racing toward the river trail.

CHAPTER III

THE MAN HIMSELF

FOR perhaps ten minutes following the abrupt departure of Eleanor Seddon, Beaudry Rand stood on the big gallery of the ranchhouse watching the girl as she rode steadily down the river trail. He saw the gray horse cross the long stretch of plain that began at the ranchhouse; he watched while the animal fled over some bare hills; and when at last horse and rider came for an instant into bold relief on the crest of a high ridge that formed the southern sky-line, Rand smiled mirthlessly, walked into the big front room, took the picture of his father from the wall, stuck it under an arm, and strode into another room — his bedroom.

There he removed a bust photograph of a woman from the wall near his bed; and with both pictures — one under his arm and the other in his right hand — he returned to the porch and seated himself in a chair.

Holding the two pictures close together, so that the strong north light shone on them, he studied them.

Had Eleanor Seddon been there to see him, she would have marveled over the swiftly changing expression of Rand's face. For when his gaze rested on the photo-

graph of the woman, his eyes grew wistful, gentle, and worshipful; his lips curved into a smile that was tenderly reminiscent. Again, reverently he kissed the photograph holding it tightly to his lips, while his face paled and the love-hunger of a loyal son for his dead mother held him in a mighty clutch.

His eyes grew hard and his lips formed two straight stiff lines when he turned the woman's picture face down on his lap and looked at the photograph of the man. His muscles grew taut, his chin went outward in a vicious thrust, and his eyes gleamed with a cold fire. He sat there rigid and motionless, while passions, virulent and blighting, seethed through him.

It was not the first time he had held the two pictures together, comparing them; nor was it the first time the passion had gripped him. Since he had been old enough to think for himself he had known what it was to feel the blood-lust gripping him. It had been a heritage from his father — the man of the photograph — this bitter malignant passion; and it had come upon him when he had been very young — its earliest manifestation had occurred when in his fifteenth year, back in the Durango country — where he had been born — a boy from a neighboring ranch had displeased him. The boy had drawn a gun and, half in jest, half in earnest, he had pointed it at Rand.

Young Rand had worn no gun — his mother had forbidden that. And yet, facing the weapon in the other boy's hand, Rand had yielded to the first bitter, destroying passion that had ever seized him. He had walked straight to the boy — the muzzle of the weapon menacing him, the other boy's finger wavering on the trigger — daring him to shoot.

And when he had seen the cringing indecision in the other's eyes he knocked the weapon from his hand and leaped upon him in demoniac fury.

It had been his mother who had saved him that day — saved him from committing the murder which would have made him like his outlaw father — a conscienceless killer of men.

He had not known then, of course, that he had inherited his violent passions from his father; that the queer, cynical, and malevolent feeling that came over him at sight of another man wearing a six-shooter was a yearning to kill — a lust that his father had bequeathed him.

Later, though, he knew. And during all his days — from the instant the knowledge had burst upon him until the present — he had fought the passion. He had fought it with his love for the woman of the photograph; with the memories of her gentleness, her goodness, and by centering his thoughts upon the things she had taught him.

For when he had grown old enough to understand —

after his father's death — she had warned him. She had seen in him the evidence of those violent, savage impulses which had made an outlaw of his father; and she had told him that once he drew a gun to slay a fellow-man he would be lost — for he had inherited his father's terrible blood-lust.

There were men, she had said, who had slain without yielding to the passion to slay; but they were men in whom the will to withhold violence was stronger than the will to slay. He would not be of that type, she told him. And he knew she had spoken the truth.

He had known "killers" — men who had not been able to resist the impulse to slay once they had yielded to it. He had seen them cruel and venomous, taunting prospective victims, provoking them to some action that would give them an excuse to shoot.

He did not try to condone their actions — he despised the type. And yet he knew their passion for his own; and several times, when men had provoked him, and when he had been forced to draw his gun in self-protection, he had almost yielded to it.

But at those times he had kept his mother's face in mind, and thoughts of her had saved him. Twice since he had bought the Three Bar — once in Ocate and once just outside the town — he had clashed with men who had deliberately sought trouble with him. And both times, with

the yearning to slay them deep in his soul, he had withheld his hand, merely wounding the men.

But though he had not yet killed a man, he knew that in a section of the country where law and order had not been established, a man's ability with the six-shooter was his only hope of clinging to life. And in his clashes with the two men of Ocate, he had exhibited his uncanny cleverness with the weapon — and the inhabitants of the town had not failed to record the incidents in the storerooms of their brains.

Looking at the two pictures now he knew that his battle against the inherited vicious impulses was not yet won. Several times he had conquered them when he had been on the point of yielding; but he knew that one day, if the provocation came, he would yield. That was why, when the bitter mood came upon him — as it had today — he took his mother's picture from the wall and studied it, certain that he would get from it the encouragement he needed.

And at this instant he was in need of all the encouragement the study of his mother's picture could give him. He had never liked Amos Seddon; and now, with the knowledge that Seddon had lied about him, a bitter rage had seized him.

He knew why Seddon had lied about him. Seddon knew that he had always been straight; that the Three

Bar outfit—himself included—was composed of men not less honest than the men of other ranch outfits. But Seddon no doubt was possessed of a fear that his daughter would discover the secret of the boy—that she would learn of his guilt through him; and Seddon had deliberately poisoned the girl's mind against him.

That was the reason Rand had not revealed his identity to the girl sooner. He had been on the point of telling her when she had referred to him as an "outlaw." And because Rand knew that no one in the vicinity knew of his father's reputation—for if they had he would have heard of it in the four years he had been at the Three Bar—he had been certain the girl had meant that he, himself, was the outlaw to whom she referred.

He had permitted her to talk, for he had been eager to discover just what Seddon had said. And he had not been greatly surprised when the girl had told him that Link Compton's purpose in organizing the vigilance committee was to get evidence against him, for he was aware that Link Compton hated him as heartily.

That hatred had nothing tangible upon which to rest; but hatred was there. Rand had hated the man at first sight—when he had met him in Ocate soon after he had come to the Three Bar; and he had seen in Compton's eyes at that time the venomous, smoldering dislike that had endured until now.

And the times when Rand fought hardest against his savage impulse to slay was during those moments when some accident threw him in Link Compton's presence. He knew that if the time ever came when Compton provoked him to the point of drawing his gun, he would kill him and run the risk of yielding entirely to the passion that he was trying to crush.

He had heard enough from the girl to convince him that Seddon and Compton were plotting against him; but, strangely, as he sat in the chair looking at the two pictures his thoughts grew less vicious, and he found himself thinking of the girl.

He *had* been watching her while she was riding in the timber. He had heard from one of his men that she was back from school, and he had wanted to see her again. For on a day about four years before—just after he had bought the Three Bar—he had seen her boarding the stage at Ocate, to begin her journey to Denver, and the picture she made at that time had remained vivid in his memory.

And there had been times when he wondered if it had not been thoughts of her that influenced him to adopt Seddon's illegitimate boy and to keep secret the identity of the boy's father.

Certainly he had not kept silent on Seddon's account. Nor was he absolutely certain that thoughts of the daugh-

ter's mental distress — should she discover her father's guilt — had influenced him. He was afflicted with a growing conviction that he had yielded to a selfish impulse in adopting the boy; for in his heart, since the death of his mother, had reigned an acute hunger for something to love — something innocent and helpless — which would not be found among the women he had seen.

And when the dance-hall girl had sent for him — with rare accuracy selecting from among the many men of her acquaintance the one most likely to prove dependable in the crisis that had overtaken her — he had promptly and without question accepted the charge.

He had not even inquired the name of the boy's father — that information had been given him voluntarily, together with the injunction that he should not let Amos Seddon have the boy, even for an instant.

That had been something more than four years ago — just after Amos Seddon's wife had died; and Rand had known of Seddon's guilt before Eleanor Seddon had left the Bar S for Denver. And he had wondered then, as he wondered now, what she would say if she knew.

Then as Rand's thoughts went to the boy the savage passions that had held him for some time gradually subsided, and for a space he sat silent in the chair, the photographs forgotten, a huge grin on his face. A few minutes later he got up, went into the house, and hung the

pictures on the wall in their places; and then, still grinning, he strode into the kitchen, where the boy, in a clean blue gingham pinafore, was shooting wooden Indians with a toy pistol, and shouting "Pow!" each time he pulled the trigger of the imitation weapon.

Seated in a chair near a table was a kindly faced woman far past middle age. She was peeling potatoes and smiling benignly at the boy over the rims of her spectacles when Rand entered. In the kitchen, smoking a brier pipe, which he held between tight, withered lips as he talked to the boy, was a man who was slightly older than the woman.

Rand's smile included them all as he entered, but he went instantly to the boy and stretched out on the floor beside him.

"Knockin' 'em over, eh, Bud?" he said. "Well, darn 'em, if they're like some Apaches I used to know they deserve it!" And then, until the woman, whom he called "Aunt Betsey," announced that supper was ready, he helped the boy slaughter the red savages — though the slaughter was not characterized by the grimly bitter passions that had held him when on the porch he had been studying the two pictures.

CHAPTER IV

A WOMAN'S PERVERSENESS

AT ABOUT the time Rand and Eleanor Seddon were mounting their horses to ride to the Three Bar — after Rand had killed the wolf — Link Compton was riding across the Three Bar range in a southerly direction.

Compton knew that Eleanor Seddon had arrived in Ocate some days ago, and he was eager to see her — for he had been forced to listen much to Seddon's eulogies of her, and his interest had been awakened. But he did not wish to seem precipitate by visiting the Bar S so soon after the girl's arrival, so he had delayed.

As a matter of fact, Link Compton was not addicted to haste — in anything. He was big, massive, well proportioned; was in excellent physical condition; and the set of his head indicated that he had supreme confidence in himself.

He was handsome, though his features were rather heavy and sensuous. If Compton had affected to be fashionable in his attire — or if he had been scrupulously neat and particular — he would not have made so attractive a figure, for fine raiment would have accentuated the

impression of sensuality which one was only vaguely conscious of in his present garb.

That Compton seemed to know this was indicated by the fact that he habitually attired himself in a careless fashion, though he was careful to be certain — when in the presence of women, at least — that his soft felt sombrero was creased exactly right, that his flowing tie was arranged so that it imparted the impression of negligent unconcern; also, he saw to it that his boots were always well polished and his face cleanly shaven.

And yet Compton did not affect any mannerisms; he was always perfectly natural; and though his movements were deliberate, he somehow gave the impression that he could move quickly enough on occasion, and that tremendous force and virility lay masked beneath his outward deliberation.

That several reckless and unlawful citizens of Ocate and the surrounding country feared and respected him, suggested that there had been manifestations of the character that was hidden beneath his calm exterior.

Compton did not ride the river trail to cross Rand's land; he took the back trail — which intersected the Ocate trail at a point about two miles west of the Three Bar ranchhouse, and about the middle of the afternoon he was sitting on his horse before the front door of the Bar S, convinced that the house was deserted.

Frowning and disappointed, Compton got off his horse, walked across the porch, and knocked on the door. There was no response, and his frown deepening, Compton opened the door, entered the house, and went from one room to another, half expecting Seddon or his daughter had deliberately refused to answer the door.

When, after searching all the rooms, Compton became aware that his mean suspicions were unfounded, he went outside again, carefully closing the front door behind him, so that he left no evidence of his presence in the house.

Stepping down from the porch he went to the bunk-house; then to the stable and corral. And when at the corral fence he noted the absence of Silver, he grinned slightly, returned to the porch, and seated himself in a chair.

There, an hour later, riding rapidly along the river trail, Eleanor Seddon saw him.

The girl had almost recovered from the shock that had resulted from the knowledge that she had spent part of the afternoon riding with Beaudry Rand; but she had not forgiven Rand for deceiving her, for permitting her to think during the entire ride from the timber to the Three Bar that he was one of her father's men employed to watch her.

Nor had she forgiven him for permitting her to take

him into her confidence — in airing to him her father's opinions concerning him, and in repeating to him her father's grotesque description of his personal appearance. *That* had been outrageous!

There had been times during their ride to the Three Bar that she had looked upon Rand with an interest that had set her brain to weaving romances, with Rand and herself as the central figures — for he was a romantic figure! Or, he had been a romantic figure, rather; for now she was seething with a furious rage against him; and her mental anathemas during the ride home from the Three Bar had been directed at him definitely and vigorously.

And so, when she rode up to the front porch of the Bar S ranchhouse and sat motionless in the saddle, looking at the big man comfortably seated in a chair, and watching her with frank interest — and undoubted admiration — her face was flushed, her eyes bright. She made a picture that caused Compton's blood to leap and tingle, and his cheeks became stained with color which was the visible evidence of the desire that had laid hold of him.

He got up when Silver came to a halt, swept his soft, broad-brimmed hat from his head, and bowed gracefully to her.

"I am intruding, of course — and I ask your pardon. But I had a long ride — twenty miles — and I found no

one at home. So I took the liberty of putting a chair to work. I assure you that I have done no other damage. I am Compton, of the Two Link, down the river trail a piece."

She laughed, remembering — and returned his bow. "Mr. Compton! Oh, yes; Father spoke of you! Well, I'm sorry no one was here to welcome you. But Father is away with the outfit and the housekeeper has gone to town. I decided I wanted a look at the timber near the Three Bar. You see, it has been four years — and I used to love it!"

She swung around a little, preparing to dismount; but before she could get her feet clear of the stirrups Compton was at Silver's head, and he gallantly assisted her down. Then, before she could object, he was leading the horse toward the corral, saying lowly:

"I'll take care of Silver."

"Then you know him?" she called after him.

He looked back over his shoulder, smiling.

"Very well," he said; "I knew you would select him."

While Compton was busy with the horse, Eleanor went into the house, removed her riding-jacket and hat, and swiftly combed her wind-blown hair. By the time Compton finished with Silver, she was out on the porch again, fresh-looking; the flush still in her cheeks, her eyes still bright.

Compton did not offer to resume the chair he had been sitting in. Since he had seen the girl he had decided that Seddon's eulogies had been none too extravagant—indeed, he decided, Seddon could have made his praises more enthusiastic without overdoing it.

Therefore Compton—though his pulses were leaping with an eagerness that no other woman had ever aroused in him—did not betray his eagerness.

Outwardly he was never more deliberate in his life. Given the same opportunity—the girl alone, and they her father's friends—some men of the Compton type, ruthless, virile, with passions that the broad license of unscrupulous power and little law imparted, would have committed the error of revealing too clearly the desire that had seized them.

Compton, however, made no such mistake. Standing at the porch edge he gave the girl just that measure of admiration which would indicate that she had impressed him. The bold smile with which he greeted other women in the past—the smile whose significance had brought blushes to many fair faces—was now absent; and in the man's eyes as he looked at the girl was the nearest imitation of frank, manly interest he could summon.

"I won't stop long," he said; "I just rode over to welcome you home. For, you see," he added as he saw her eyes light with pleasure, "your father has been talk-

ing about you, and all of us denizens of the sagebrush have been anxious to see you. I have known for several days that you were home." He smiled broadly. "Don't you think I did rather well — to stay away this long?"

"Marvelously well!" she mocked, catching the spirit of banter with which he had clothed his words.

Compton talked about Denver; he learned much of her school experience; but he learned much more of her character as their talk ran from one indifferent subject to another. He discovered that she was spirited and independent; that no man had yet intrigued her interest; and by the time they had exhausted the indifferent subjects there was not the least atmosphere of constraint between them.

"Are you *sure* you are Mr. Compton, of the Two Link?" she asked, her eyes twinkling as she looked down at him. "For," she added, without giving him a chance to reply, "I made one mistake today, and I don't want to make another. You see," she explained, "Father warned me about going into the timber. But I love the timber, and I just couldn't help going. And when I got into the timber, I got off Silver to pick some flowers, forgetting that a range horse would not stand with the reins tied to the saddle-horn."

She told him about the wolf, and about her rescuer. And when she related what had happened at the Three

Bar, when Rand had shown her the photograph of his father, she saw Compton's lips straighten.

"He admitted his father was an outlaw, eh?" said Compton, after she had finished.

She nodded, adding: "And he certainly *looked* like an outlaw!"

"And Beau Rand, himself?" questioned Compton.

She looked with covert sharpness at the Two Link owner, noting the cold levelness of his gaze, and the slight pout that had come to his lips.

"You want to know what I think of him?" she asked, a gleam of mischief in her eyes — for she saw that Compton's cheeks were stained darkly, and that his eyes were alight with an expression that seemed almost malignant — reminding her of the expression of her father's face on the day he had told her to beware of Rand.

It was jealousy that had seized Compton — she knew it! And with all a woman's perverseness, she said:

"Why, Father drew a terrible description of Rand! I believe that was why I did not recognize Rand when I saw him after he had killed the wolf. You see, I was expecting him to have pink hair and a number of other things not commonly worn by humans. And I discovered him to be a rather handsome and manly fellow after all. And he is quite interesting — and remarkably modest. I — rather liked him!"

Compton said nothing, for he felt that the violent passions that raged within him would have betrayed him to Miss Seddon — would have betrayed the jealousy that had seized him.

"I think," said Eleanor, wondering at Compton's continued silence, "that perhaps Rand is misunderstood."

"You say you told him what your father said about him — that he was suspected of being responsible for the stealing that has been going on around here? And you also told him I suspected him and was trying to get evidence against him?"

"And he didn't seem a bit worried about it!" declared the girl.

"He was riding a Bar S horse?" said Compton. "Are you sure of that?"

The girl nodded, and Compton smiled faintly.

"Well," he said significantly, "I am glad your adventure didn't turn out to be any worse than it did. And," he added, looking at her with a straight, penetrating gaze, "I am glad you found Rand interesting. But may I hope that you won't play favorites — at least until you find out more about us — all of us. And don't be stingy about your rides. I occasionally have time, and if you really want somebody to go with you, why I ——"

"Twenty miles!" she interrupted, laughter in her voice; "why, when I got here a little while ago you com-

plained that you had ridden very far — twenty miles — and you were sitting in a chair — almost ready to collapse! Don't you think a twenty-mile ride, just to accompany me, would be a little more than you could stand?"

His eyes gleamed; some of the boldness that he had hitherto concealed shone in them.

"If a man likes a woman —" he began.

"I don't like sentimental men," she interrupted, her eyes chilling.

He laughed, and bowed to her. "And I like a spirited woman," he said. His eyes grew quizzical. "I'll ride that twenty miles — any time — if it kills me!" he vowed with pretended recklessness. "Tomorrow?" he inquired.

"No!" she said sharply, unsmilingly.

"The day after?" he persisted.

"Not then — never, perhaps."

"Well," he laughed, "I shall be riding over to see your father. And perhaps — some day — you will go riding with me. I shall hope, at least."

He got on his horse and rode away, while Eleanor stood on the porch watching him, conscious that he had impressed her as deeply as Rand had impressed her. And yet there was a difference.

Compton was big and bold and magnetic. And while she liked him, she realized that his appeal was physical.

On the other hand, while she was convinced that she hated Rand, she was conscious of the manhood of him — a thing not to be measured by appearances — the atmosphere of stern and uncompromising earnestness which, contrasted to Compton's light boldness, made him seem to be the better man. And yet, when from a distance Compton turned in the saddle and waved a hand at her, she answered him in a like manner, blushing.

CHAPTER V

THE CONSPIRATORS

COMPTON'S back had hardly been turned upon Eleanor Seddon when he scowled and drew a deep breath of rage and disappointment. For he had divined from the girl's manner that he was not to make the easy conquest he had anticipated. Worse, she had met Beaudry Rand, and liked him. Therefore, nursing his bitter hatred for Rand, and adding to it the jealousy that had been aroused over the meeting between the two, Compton's passions were murderous as he rode away.

He had not asked Eleanor where her father had gone; he knew the Bar S outfit was working the southerly section of the range — where there was still a little water; and he headed southward, riding steadily.

Dusk overtook him before he came within sight of the Bar S outfit wagon; and night had fallen when he rode up to the camp fire, around which the men of the outfit were congregated.

Compton had ridden another twenty miles to reach the Bar S outfit, and he was in no good humor. He listened impatiently to Seddon's plaint of things gone wrong — of cattle in some near-by timber; of the inclination of neigh-

boring cattlemen to "hog it" in the matter of unbranded calves; of the growing difficulty of conducting a round-up, due to the ever-increasing number of ranchers in the vicinity.

But at last Compton drew Seddon aside. Standing near the chuck wagon, the light from the camp fire in their faces, Compton grinned maliciously at Seddon.

"I'm glad to see you have overcome your ridiculous prejudice against Beau Rand," said Compton.

Seddon stiffened. "Meanin' what?"

"Meaning that Rand went riding with your daughter today in the timber, near the Three Bar. Rand rescued her from a wolf that attacked her, took her to the Three Bar, and got sufficiently intimate with her to show her the pictures in the family album."

Seddon's face worked with a rage that made him breathless.

"I knowed the damn skunk would manage it!" he cursed, after a time, while Compton watched him with a grin of bitter interest. "Now, what in hell was she doin' in the timber — when I told her to stay away from it!"

Compton laughed. "If I've sized her up right, she'll be doing what she pleases," he said; "she's got a mind of her own. I had quite a little talk with her, Seddon. She'd look well seated opposite me at the dining-room table at the Two Links. I mean to have her — you agreeing."

Some of the passion went out of Seddon's face, leaving it pale. And his eyes gleamed truculently as he leaned forward to peer into Compton's face.

"Just what do you mean by that?" he demanded.

Compton laughed lowly. "I mean to run straight with her," he said.

Seddon drew a deep breath. "You've got to, Compton —or you don't run at all!" He now laughed, mockingly. "How do you know she'd have you? She ain't the kind of a girl that a man can win against her will!"

"She's a thoroughbred!" declared Compton. And now his eyes gleamed balefully in the semidarkness. "But she's met Rand, and he's a handsome devil," he added, watching Seddon's face closely. He saw Seddon's fingers go around the rim of the wagon wheel nearest him, gripping the wheel with all his strength, while he stood, rigid and straining, yielding to the terrible passion that had seized him.

Compton laughed lowly and vibrantly. "You don't like that prospect, eh? Well, why don't you get Rand out of the way?"

Seddon relaxed; Compton saw him tremble; noted the pallid face and the shifting eyes.

Compton grinned understandingly.

"Scared of him, eh?" he said.

"Who in hell ain't scared of him?" demanded Seddon.

"There ain't a man in the damned country that will face him when he's wearin' a gun — an' that's all the time! Scared of him? Hell's fire! All Ocate's scared of him! Ain't I seen them? Standin' around when he's in town — every man of them yearnin' to salivate him, an' not a damned one of them got nerve enough to look him straight in the eye! Scared of him!"

Compton laughed smoothly. "I admit he's got the boys bluffed. But did he ever down a man? Think! You remember the time he had a run-in with Kel Latan — that gunman I brought over from Yuma? And that other guy — Blacky Pelton — that you got from Dry Bottom, to wipe him out? Well, what did he do to them? Pinked them — that's all! Put both of Latan's arms out of business, and busted Pelton's shoulder so that Pelton could never lift an arm again.

"But he didn't kill them; he was mighty careful of that! It puzzled me quite a bit, I admit; and I never could understand Rand. But I've got him right, now, Seddon! Today he showed your daughter a photograph of his father. His father was Beaudry Rand, the outlaw. I've heard of him — he was from the Durango country. Like a damned fool, I never associated the names — or I should have recalled the history of Rand's father. He was a killer, Seddon — a he-devil with a gun; quick as lightning on the draw! And he shot to kill every time!

"Understand, now? Young Rand is afraid of himself; he's afraid to kill a man for fear he'll be just like his father. He's inherited his father's blood-lust, and he knows that once he lets go he'll turn into a killer! He has proved that, hasn't he? He knew Latan and Pelton were out to get him, and he lets them off, just wounding them."

Seddon shook his head. "I ain't takin' any chances with the cuss," he said. "Mebbe he's afraid to shoot to kill, an' mebbe he ain't. But if that's why he ain't done any killin', mebbe there'll come a time when he *will* let loose. An' I ain't yearnin' to be in front of his guns when he *does* let go all holds!"

Compton grinned evilly. "He's riding a black horse, branded with the Bar S. Where did he get it?"

"Bought it from Mellert — my range boss. That black — Midnight — was an outlaw, an' I told Mellert to get rid of him. So he sold him to Rand, an' Rand broke him, makin' the best horse in the country out of him — damn him!"

"Did Mellert give him a bill of sale?"

"No!" snapped Seddon; "what you gettin' at?"

"Getting at Rand," said Compton shortly. "You back my play and we'll frame him. I'll fix it with the sheriff tonight."

Shortly before midnight, Compton rode into Ocate and

dismounted at a hitching rail in front of a big frame building, still agleam with lights, across whose front was a huge sign:

THE GILT EDGE SALOON AND DANCE-HALL

Entering, Compton stood for an instant blinking at the lights and grinning at the crowd that thronged the barroom and the dance-hall in the rear. And when, his eyes becoming accustomed to the glare, he saw a big man seated at a table at the rear of the barroom, he strode to the table, seated himself in a chair opposite the big man, and smiled at him.

"For a sheriff, you're reasonably liberal-minded, Webster," he said. "If you'd move your office down here——"

The big man grinned. "Law an' order," he said; "I've got to be on the job, here!"

"Speaking of jobs," said Compton, leaning close to the other and lowering his voice, "we've got the goods on Beau Rand!"

"The hell you have!" said the sheriff. He was surprised, and he tried to get some enthusiasm into his voice. But the color left his face, and his eyes drooped to a glass on the table in front of him. He fingered it nervously as he listened to Compton, who continued to talk.

Later the sheriff got up and went out, returning after

a few minutes with a tall, slender, cruel-faced man, whom he introduced as "Slim" Kinney. The man wore two guns, both swung low at his hips. There was a hard, cynical light in his eyes as he looked at Compton while Webster introduced him.

"Slim's been achin' to join us for quite a spell," said Webster. "Down Bernalillo way — where Slim's been hangin out — things has been gettin' pretty hot for him; them havin' no sheriff whose views is as broad as mine — an' Slim needin' lots of broadness in his business. He's allowin' he'd admire to be one of my deputies — an' he'd admire to have the job of salivatin' Beau Rand. I reckon we ain't objectin'." The sheriff's eyes glittered.

Kinney dropped into a chair, and Compton ordered drinks. And while the three men sat there over the bottles and glasses they talked long and earnestly; their voices rising toward the end as the liquor in the bottle slowly vanished.

It was after midnight when they got up, the sheriff staggering a little; Kinney's face flushed, and his legs unsteady. Compton, however, seemed unaffected by the whisky; and when they went out through the front door, Compton walked as straight as he had walked when he had entered.

All of which led an observer to remark, admiringly, to a friend:

"Link Compton don't let nothin' feaze him!"

But Compton might have worried a little had he known what happened in the Gilt Edge immediately after he went out with Webster and Kinney. For a tall, gracefully built girl, with dark hair and black, lambent eyes, which were flashing with passion, had watched Compton and the others leave the room. During all the time that Compton and the others had sat at their table, talking, the girl had been sitting in a chair in the dance-hall, pretending to watch the dancers, but in reality listening to the conversation carried on between the three men.

At first she had been merely tired, and had leaned her head against the thin board partition that separated the barroom from the dance-hall. But when she heard Compton's voice, and Webster's — and later Kinney's — she had pressed an ear hard against the partition, and despite the noise, she had heard much — especially during the lulls in the dancing.

She got up now, slipping along the partition until she reached the slender stairway that led upward to her room above the dance-hall. There, at the foot of the stairs, a man halted her.

"Leavin' us now, Lucia?" he demanded, reaching out an unsteady hand.

She looked at him with steady eyes, her dark face set

and hard. The man withdrew his hand and stepped back.

"In a tantrum again, eh?" he laughed. "Well, I ain't rilin' you none!"

She got up the stairs without further molestation, and in her room she swiftly changed her clothing; emerging later, attired in riding garments that fitted her snugly and becomingly.

She paused in the upper hall, listening; then she went swiftly to the far end of the passage and ran down an outside stairway. Down in the somber shadows of the building she paused again, to peer around the corner nearest her. Then, seeing no one, she ran to a stable in the rear of the building, entered, emerging later leading a pony.

Mounting the animal, she headed it across the moonlit plain that began at the edge of town, and rode rapidly over a narrow trail that, she knew, would take her straight to the Three Bar.

The distance was about five miles, but the little animal under her made short work of it, and within half an hour from the time she had mounted she was standing at the front door of the Three Bar ranchhouse pounding on one of the panels.

Shortly the door opened and Rand stood on the threshold looking at her; partly dressed, his feet bare, a heavy pistol in his right hand.

"Lucia Morell!" he exclaimed when he saw her. And then he was out on the porch, gripping one of her arms, and peering closely at her, for he saw the excitement in her eyes.

"What's up?" he demanded.

"Plenty, Rand," she said, her breath coming fast. "Link Compton is planning to kill you! Tonight I heard them talking about you. It's about that black horse of yours—Midnight! They say you stole him! Amos Seddon has charged you with it. And tonight Link Compton came to town and told Webster. They're not going to arrest you—they're going to shoot you! They've hired a gunfighter named Slim Kinney. They've deputized him, and they're going to wait until you come to town. Then they'll kill you, and say you resisted arrest!"

CHAPTER VI

THE WATCHER

RAND laughed lowly, and grasping the girl by the shoulders, turned her around so that the moonlight shone on her face.

He had seen the girl several times at the Gilt Edge—on those nights when the monotony of life had afflicted him and he had gone to town to relieve it. Several times he had danced with her, and there had been other times when he had sat at one of the tables with her, talking. And he had found her interesting, despite the life she led.

That, however, had been the limit of his acquaintance with her—for he had no liking for her kind. He had not failed to note, though, that she was interested in him, and for that reason he had made his visits to the Gilt Edge as infrequent as possible.

He was aware of his obligation; and there was no doubt that had she not warned him he might have gone, unknowing, to his death at the hands of the gunfighter.

Releasing her shoulders, he took one of her hands, gripping it tightly.

"You are a bang-up girl, Lucia, an' I thank you for warnin' me. I ain't claimin' to know why you came

here — I reckon I don't quite get the drift. I thought you an' Link Compton was pretty thick, an'——"

"Bah!" she sneered, her teeth flashing; "Compton is a — a beast!"

"You've had a fallin' out, eh?" he said; "an' you're doin' this to get even with him."

"No!" she said violently; "that isn't so! Rand—" she added, trying to get closer to him. Her eyes were glowing with a light that he could not mistake, and his lips straightened as he seized her by the shoulders and held her off.

She looked downward for an instant, plainly disappointed; and then up again, her eyes searching his.

"You like another girl?" she asked slowly.

He shook his head; but at the instant he thought of Eleanor Seddon. She saw the glow in his eyes and her own flashed.

"Yes," she said; "you like another girl. Who is she?"

He laughed lightly, though his face grew flushed.

"Shucks!" he said, "you women have sure got keen eyes. But you're hittin' the wrong trail now, Lucia — there ain't no girl that would take a shine to me. Anyway," he went on sharply as she essayed to interrupt, "there ain't no time to do any love gassin' tonight! You hop right on your cayuse an' get back to the Gilt Edge before anybody gets wise that you left."

"Well," she said, looking defiantly up at him, her lips pursed; "you might kiss me — once — for visiting you at this time of the night."

He bent toward her, grinning, and lightly brushed her cheek. He would have stepped back, then, but she slipped suddenly sidewise, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him fervently half a dozen times on the lips — holding him tightly to her, her lithe form writhing in the effort to draw his head down so that she might hold it captive.

He freed himself, and stepped back, holding her off at arm's length to look at her. Her eyes were aflame, and she laughingly backed away from him, saying:

"There, now! Do you think another girl could love you like that?"

"Shucks!" he said, grinning; "I didn't think you was goin' to herd-ride me!"

Her laugh came back to him as he stood on the porch watching her as she rode toward town; and he stood there for some minutes after she had vanished, thinking of her.

"I reckon she's holdin' somethin' against Compton that ain't forgivable — to make her act like that to me," he reflected. "Women like that has a mighty hard time of it — gettin' a man to love them like they want to be loved. I reckon no *man* is doin' it!"

Entering the house, his face setting into hard, grim

lines as he crossed the threshold, he went to his room, pulled on his boots, and got into the garments that he had neglected to put on when aroused by Lucia Morell, moving stealthily, lest he awaken Bud and Aunt Betsey and Uncle Ephraim.

Fully dressed, he buckled on his cartridge belt, swinging a pistol at each hip — low down; and carefully tying the bottoms of the holsters to the legs of his leather *chaparajos* — a precaution of the careful gunman against the accidental snagging of the weapon when rapid drawing is necessary.

Noiselessly crossing the floor, he went out, carefully closing the door behind him. Then he went to the horse corral, roped Midnight, threw saddle and bridle on him, leaped into the saddle, and rode down the river trail.

With the first streak of dawn Amos Seddon was riding his horse along the corral fence, making for the gate, where he intended to turn in the animal.

Seddon had not been able to sleep after Link Compton had left him; he had sat glumly near the fire, thinking of Eleanor and her meeting with Rand.

And when the other men had wrapped themselves in their blankets, stretching out, their feet toward the fire, Seddon had sat there still, a sullen gleam in his eyes, his thoughts centering heavily upon Rand and his daughter

At last, about one o'clock in the morning, he had not been able to endure the mental misery any longer. He had aroused the cook, telling him to inform the men that he had gone back to the ranchhouse; then he had caught up his horse, mounted him, and set out for home.

For the first time since Eleanor had been home he felt a glow of rage toward the girl. She had disobeyed him; she had deliberately thrown herself into Rand's company. For he had not failed to note her interest in the man when he had been telling her about him, and he meant to take her to task for her disobedience.

But his rage against his daughter detracted nothing from the fury he felt over the thought that perhaps Rand might have met her purposely, by design. Rand was none too good to do a thing like that, he told himself; Rand was a miserable, sneaking coyote, or he would not have stepped in when he had to take the boy away from him.

It is one of the grotesque truths that a thing is never so valuable as when it is unattainable—and at this moment Seddon felt that he wanted the boy more than ever before—even though he had not had courage enough to take him when he had had an opportunity. It was not until Rand had taken the boy that Seddon had realized he wanted the youngster himself.

Dismounting at the corral gate, his thoughts were viciously centered upon Rand. He drew mental pictures

of Rand talking with his daughter; he could even see Rand's crooked smile as he watched the girl's face, while he meditated over the secret he possessed. He even debated the impulse that, he felt, must have been in Rand's mind when he had been in the girl's presence: "Should he tell her?"

Rand *would* tell her, of course, for Rand was that kind; he would tell her just to be mean — just to bring confusion upon *him*. He'd have to kill Rand now; he wouldn't even wait until Compton could frame up on Rand; he would see Eleanor first, to tell her he knew she had been talking to Rand, and then he would ride over to the Three Bar to kill Rand.

So terrible was his rage that when he passed the stable door he had to stop there and stand for a time, lest he lose his self-control entirely. He waited, calming himself a little, for he did not want Eleanor to see him in his present temper.

And while he stood there a tremor of fear ran over him. He thought it was a reaction from his rage. But it was not. He knew that presently, when his thoughts went again to Rand. He knew he would not ride over to the Three Bar to kill Rand, for even now, standing there, the fear he felt for Rand increased.

It whitened his face, it made his breath labor and lag in his throat, so that he reached up and clawed at the collar

of his shirt in an effort to lessen the constriction that seemed to be there.

Then he shuddered, seized with one of those inexplicable and compelling presentiments which seem to warn one of an evil presence. He yielded to it, wheeling swiftly, his right hand on the butt of his pistol — to see Rand standing at a corner of the stable watching him.

CHAPTER VII

WAITING

SEDDON did not know how long Rand had been there —many minutes, he supposed, judging from Rand's attitude. For Rand was standing with legs asprawl, his arms folded, the fingers of his right hand gently caressing his chin. There was a curious half-smile on Rand's face —it was as though an evil passion in Rand's heart was engaged in a mighty battle with the grim humor that seemed to dominate him.

And Seddon found himself hoping that the humor would continue to dominate; for he had never seen Rand in that mood. For in Rand's attitude, in the smile, in the atmosphere around him, in some intangible something that seemed to linger about him, was a slumbering threat of destroying violence.

Seddon did not draw the pistol that reposed so near his limp fingers; he knew he could not do it. A gleam in Rand's eyes told him that Rand was waiting for just such a movement; and though he knew that Rand's hands would have to travel farther than his own to reach the pistols at his hips, he dared not take the chance.

And, so great was the tension that held him, he started and flung his hands upward when Rand spoke:

"Thinkin' mean thoughts about me, wasn't you, Seddon? Oh, don't!"

His voice was a curious, slow drawl — vibrating a little, as though the man were having trouble in restraining the intense passion that had gripped him. But his grin was growing broader, and a sensation of vast relief stole over Seddon. And yet there was a threatening quality in the grin, too. Seddon stood rigid as Rand spoke again:

"Conscience, eh?" he said. "I was wonderin' if you *had* any. It's the first time you've showed it." He grinned crookedly. "I reckon you're fussed up about that outlaw horse Mellert sold me — Midnight. Recollect him, eh? Well, when I bought Midnight from Mellert I clean forgot to get a bill of sale for him. I'm takin' it now!"

Seddon gulped and cleared his throat before he could speak. He feared Rand, but he also feared Link Compton's wrath.

"Mellert sold him to you," he said; "it's up to Mellert to fix up a receipt for the money you paid him."

Rand's eyes narrowed to glittering pin points; he grinned felinely and lowered his hands, so that the fingers brushed the butts of his pistols. And his voice came sharply, viciously:

"I'm wantin' that bill of sale right now. You an' me are goin' to conclude a business deal accordin' to fair an' square rules. You're precedin' me to your office, where you're intendin' to scribble some on a billhead. You're goin' to show a heap of speed. An' if you do any yappin' in the office, to get your daughter in there *before* you do your scribblin', the mourners will be on the job, pronto. Mosey along, you polecat!"

For an instant Seddon hesitated. Then he turned, and without a word began to walk toward the ranchhouse, Rand close behind him.

Convinced of the utter futility of resistance, Seddon did not hesitate when he reached the office — which was entered through a door that opened from the front porch. Inside, he sat at a little, flat-topped desk and wrote:

Received from Beaudry Rand one hundred and twenty-five dollars as payment in full for a black outlaw horse, named Midnight.

Rand was standing over him as he wrote, directing him.

"Now date it," ordered Rand. "Make it the 25th of March. That's the day I paid Mellert the money. An' now," he added as he folded the paper and stuck it in a pocket, "I reckon that squares us — on that deal."

He looked at Seddon with a mirthless smile, which had

in it a quality of irony that made Seddon look at him in wonder. And while Seddon watched him he drew a chair near the desk, dropped into it, and leaned back, as though he intended to remain there indefinitely.

Seddon continued to look at him, amazed at this strange proceeding; for it seemed to Seddon that were he in Rand's place he would have departed — for obviously, he had received what he had come for.

But it seemed that Rand had no intention of going. At least not for a while; for he leaned back lazily, pretending to look out of one of the windows — though Seddon knew the gleaming eyes were watching him covertly, to forestall any attempt he might make to recover the paper.

For a quarter of an hour Seddon sat, almost consumed with curiosity, watching Rand. Still Rand did not move, nor did he speak. The silence grew unbearable to Seddon; for he knew that back of Rand's continuing presence in the office was a reason — he would not sit there, with his pretense and his silence, unless he meditated some other surprising action.

Seddon grew restless and impatient and wrathful. But Rand continued to sit there, silent and motionless.

And at last Seddon could stand the suspense no longer.

"Why in hell don't you get out of here?" he blurted. "You've got what you come for!"

Rand turned then, looking at Seddon, his eyes glinting

with a mocking light that made Seddon yearn to draw his gun. And yet he knew he dared not draw the weapon; for though there was mockery in Rand's eyes, there was also a malicious devil in them, carrying a warning to Seddon.

"You been readin' my mind while you've been settin' there, Seddon?" he inquired gently. "Well, I've been wonderin' if you was. For I've been thinkin' a heap — an' none of my thoughts was complimentin' you any." He grinned, and Seddon cringed into his chair. "If you didn't quite ketch *everything* I was thinkin' about, I'll help you out a little. It sure was interestin' — to me.

"First, I was just settin' here, waitin' for it to get time for your daughter to get up — I ain't eager to spoil her sleep none."

"What you wantin' my daughter for?" demanded Seddon, a great fear gripping him — a fear that Rand wanted Eleanor for the purpose of telling her about the boy — his boy.

"Well," grinned Rand, "my thoughts *was* a lot jumbled — that's a fact! So you didn't read them right? They was like a herd of cattle millin' around, gettin' ready to stampede. There didn't seem to be no sense or logic to them. But one thing was stickin' out plain in them — an' I couldn't lose it. It was this: You lied about me to your daughter!

"That's a heap disconcertin', ain't it?" he added as Seddon started and gripped the arms of his chair. "It was disconcertin' to me, too — when she begun tellin' me what you said. You made it strong, didn't you? You told her I was an outlaw — that I run my brand on other folks' cattle an' horses; an' that I robbed the stage; an' so forth, an' so on, with all the variations. An' all the time you knowed you was a damned liar, an' that you was poisonin' her mind against me. What for? That's what I'm intendin' to find out!"

He looked keenly at Seddon during the silence that followed his words. And he saw Seddon writhe and squirm in his chair and glare murder at him.

"I reckon it was because you was scared I'd go to gassin' to her about the boy," he went on when Seddon did not answer. "Well, you needn't worry about *that* — I wouldn't want any girl to know that her dad had been such a skunk!

"I had other thoughts, too — an' some of them was some prominent. One of the big ones — that kept stickin' its head up, was that you ought to tell her you'd made a mistake about me — that you'd sized me up wrong. I ain't carin' how you do it. But we've got lots of time, an' you can get your thinkin' cap on while we're waitin' for your daughter to get up. She'll be up in an hour or so, I reckon. It's five o'clock now.

"An' while you're thinkin' of that, you can think of somethin' else, too," he went on, grinning coldly. "You can consider how nice an' comfortable you've got it here —in the ranchhouse—an' how it's too nice an' homey here for a man to be runnin' around the country—especially today. You can decide that you won't do any ridin' today—that you won't join the outfit, an' that if any man of the outfit comes you won't be able to see him—you'll be sick or somethin'. You'll find the excuse.

"An' you won't go to Ocate today, nor send no messenger—for fear Link Compton an' the sheriff an' that gunfighter they've got in town waitin' for me, will know that I've got a bill of sale for Midnight. You won't do anything that will let them know, for if you do I'll ram both my guns into your waistband and blow you so far into hell that the devil an' his imps would spend a thousand years lookin' for you!"

He leaned forward in his chair, his eyes gleaming with a cold ferocity that made Seddon shiver.

"You understand me?" demanded Rand when Seddon did not speak.

Seddon nodded.

"Then we'll do our waitin'."

Rand settled back into his seat again, while Seddon, his face crimson with a futile rage, gripped the arms of his chair and watched him.

A clock in the office ticking monotonously, made the only sound in the tense, brooding silence of the room. A half-hour dragged by — three-quarters. And then Seddon fidgeted and glared venomously at Rand, silent, imperturbable, his face expressionless.

Seddon writhed and squirmed in his chair. The inexorable will of the other man was compelling him to do a thing his soul revolted from. But he knew he would do it — for there was no other way. He had seen the implacable determination in Rand's eyes; he saw it even now in Rand's apparently unconcerned attitude. For Rand's attitude advertised that he knew Seddon would do as he said — that he had no doubt of it.

Seddon had always feared Rand — feared him as much as he hated him. And he knew that Rand could shoot to kill if he wanted to; that he had exercised forbearance in the clashes he had had with the two gunmen who had been deliberately seeking his life. Ocate knew it — everybody knew; and since that time no man of Ocate had trifled with him.

For Rand was a puzzle to them all. They whispered to one another that Rand had never killed a man; that he lacked the nerve to kill; there were some of them who even jeeringly remarked — always when Rand was not present — that he was "yellow" — a term descriptive of a cowardice too contemptible to merit attention.

And yet no man of Ocate — or of the surrounding country — ever had attempted personally to prove the charge; and all men treated him with frigid respect and deference — which indicated their brains had formed opinions which they dared not express in Rand's presence.

It was that way with them all — with all of Rand's enemies. They were puzzled, mystified — baffled by the lingering threat in his manner; by the uncertainty of him; they were awed by the dread thought that though he had — to their knowledge — never killed a man, he might at any time decide to do so. And no man of them cared to be the first.

Nor did Seddon care to be the first; it was an experiment from which he shrank in fear and trembling.

CHAPTER VIII

A SHATTERED PIPE

SITTING there in the chair now, Seddon knew he hated Rand more than he ever had hated him; and yet he was convinced that when Rand gave him the order to tell Eleanor that he had been mistaken in his estimation of Rand's character—that he had unknowingly lied about him—he would do it. And when, just before the hands of the clock pointed to six, Seddon heard a sound in the house, indicating that Eleanor had awakened and was moving about, he looked at Rand, to see the other watching him with cold level gaze.

"You'll call her now," said Rand.

Seddon got up slowly and walked to the inside door.

"Damn you!" he declared venomously. "I'll get even with you some day for this!"

Rand's grin was saturnine. "I'll know if you go to back-bitin' me to her," he said evenly. "You tellin' her now that you was wrong when you told her I was the mean man you said I was will make her treat me like a white man. An' if she gets treatin' me like an outlaw again I'll come for you. Then you'll have your chance to get even! Start yappin'!"

Standing in the open doorway, Seddon called gruffly:

"If you've finished dressin', Ellie, come into the office —I've got a visitor!"

"There's tones of voice," came Rand's voice behind him warningly; "there's a vinegar voice an' a voice of honey. If you go to speakin' sour to her, she'll get wise —an' you'll croak, wonderin' why you didn't have more sense!"

Rand's voice had hardly died away when there was a rustle at the door, and Eleanor Seddon stood in the opening.

She caught her breath with a quick gasp when she saw Rand — who was now on his feet, bowing to her, his face expressionless, his eyes twinkling with some mysterious emotion — and then she stiffened, lifted her chin defiantly and spoke to her father, ignoring Rand.

"Is *this* your visitor?" she coldly inquired. "Beaudry Rand, the outlaw?"

And now she gazed at Rand with cold, steady hostility, which he met with a gravely gentle smile.

"I reckon things have been a bit mixed up, ma'am," he said. "I ain't much on the talk, an' so your father will do the explainin'." And he looked at Seddon.

Seddon fidgeted nervously. "Ellie," he said, "when I was talkin' to you the other day — about Rand, here — I made a mistake, I reckon. I told you he was the man

who was stealin' stock right an' left, an' holdin' up the stage. I reckon I went too far. I was talkin' extravagant; the reason bein' that I'd missed a black outlaw horse, which we called Midnight—an' I'd seen Rand ridin' him. But since then I've found out that Rand didn't steal the horse—he bought him from Mellert—my range boss—an' everything is all regular an' straight. It was just a misunderstandin'. Rand ain't no outlaw."

The girl's face crimsoned; she looked from her father to Rand—who did not smile, though he felt much like smiling—and then back to her father, who reddened again and could not meet her gaze.

"Why, Daddy!" she said then. "How unjust of you! You judged Mr. Rand before you knew! Was that the evidence you meant Mr. Compton was getting—evidence that Mr. Rand stole Midnight?"

"I reckon," muttered Seddon.

"And you had no other evidence against him—no evidence whatever, in fact?" she demanded.

The girl looked intently at him, assuming that his obvious distress was caused by remorse over his mistake; and then she walked straight to Rand and extended a hand to him, saying earnestly:

"I am sorry, Mr. Rand. But, you see——"

He interrupted her, for he saw the embarrassment shining in her eyes:

"Shucks! it ain't anything. I reckon you had cause to be mighty suspicious. When I think of how stiff an' mysterious I was when I took you into the house an' showed you the picture of my dad, I'm some surprised that I wasn't suspicious of myself.

"You see, what you'd said about me bein' an outlaw had kind of got under my skin, an' I was feelin' a bit flustered — an' mean. An' you had cause to run away — like you did." He looked at her, mirth in his eyes.

"I didn't run — so very fast!" she denied, meeting his eyes and wondering how, yesterday, she had decided they were like the eyes of the man of the photograph. For they were not like his father's; there was nothing cruel in them. On the contrary, they were wise, subtle, humorous eyes; the hard steel-gray of them softened by a luminous glow that hinted of gentleness.

But there was something more in them, too, she knew — a something that baffled her — a glint of recklessness mingled with the gentleness she knew was there — a slumbering something that convinced her he was an enigma not to be solved at a glance — or perhaps not to be solved at all.

"Well," he said, "mebbe your horse wasn't runnin'; but from where I stood it seemed to me he was doin' somethin' that looked mighty like runnin'."

"So you watched me?" she said.

"Why sure, ma'am," he grinned.

"You had been watching me in the timber, too!" said, remembering that he had told her that; and remembering, too, that since it had turned out that he was not employed by her father he could have no excuse for spying upon her in the timber. She had not forgiven him for that!

"I reckon I've got to do some explainin' about that," he told her gravely. "I saw you comin' toward the timber. I was mendin' a saddle-cinch on Midnight, an' I saw you headin' for the timber. I didn't know then that you was Eleanor Seddon—though mebbe I had a mighty strong suspicion—you comin' from this direction, an' me havin' got a glimpse of you the day you left Ocate to go to school at Denver.

"That timber is alive with wolves, ma'am; an' you was alone. So I jumped on Midnight an' moseyed around, keepin' you in sight. But mostly, I was keepin' in sight that wolf I salivated. He'd picked up your trail mighty soon after you got into the timber, an' I wasn't allowin' I wanted him to get that kind of a dinner."

"He *did* look hungry," she said, shuddering.

He laughed lowly, and stepped toward the door, for now that Seddon had set him right with the girl he felt he had no right to linger longer—much as he wished he might.

or the girl had made a deep impression upon him. e lure of her had seized him; he felt its strength; he as aware of the gripping desire that had fastened upon him. His experience with women had been elemental—he had seen few good ones and had avoided the bad ones. However, his lack of experience with them had not prevented him visioning an ideal; and he knew the ideal was in the flesh before him.

As a matter of fact, it had been upon the glimpse of the girl, four years before, that he had fashioned his picture of the ideal that was to rule him, and during the elapsed interval she had achieved that perfection of which he dreamed.

Yet he strongly suspected she was not for him. For Fate, in the shape of the boy—Seddon's boy—had erected a barrier he could not destroy. It had aroused Seddon's malignant enmity, it had made thoughts of an agreement between him and Seddon impossible. And he also strongly suspected that the girl would be influenced by her father's attitude toward him, even if Seddon said no word to her about him.

For, though Seddon might not talk, he would inevitably betray his hatred with glances or gestures, or by inference or innuendo or abstract reference. There were many ways he could show her that he did not like Rand.

And so Rand entertained no false expectations.

That was why, when he looked at the girl now, his gaze was direct and steady. Without the conviction that he could never attain his desires he could not have met her gaze with equanimity, for the passion in his heart would have betrayed him. A grim humor kept him from betraying himself now; it kept his face from reddening, as it must have reddened if there were no obstacles and he had been able to stand before her in the rôle of suitor.

The humor was visible in the slight smile that wreathed his lips as he looked at her; the grin grew when he glanced around the room and saw that Seddon had deserted them. At that instant Seddon was standing on the front porch gazing ferociously into the gulf of distance, his soul warped with the bitterness of the rage that had seized him.

Rand's gaze returned to the girl; his voice was gentle and drawling:

"Why, your dad ain't here any more!"

She turned swiftly. "I hadn't noticed!" she said. "That is hardly polite, is it? Do you want to talk with him?"

"Don't bother," he smiled, "we had finished our talk." He opened the outside door and stood on the threshold, looking back at her, his eyes gleaming with an emotion that she could not fathom.

"Your daddy ain't a heap well," he said. "He was

tellin' me, before you come in. It's his heart, I reckon — it's sort of fluttery an' uncertain. At his age a man ought to take a day off once in a while — takin' things easy. He looks sort of excited an' touchy. He's been ridin' too much, mebbe. If I was you I'd kind of hint that he'd ought to hang around the house today — not goin' anywhere. I've told him the same thing, an' when I'm gone you can remind him of it."

An expression of concern leaped into her eyes.

"Do you think it is serious?" she questioned. "Why, I hadn't thought — or noticed. But if you think ——"

He laughed. "I reckon it ain't serious — not if he's careful. You tell him that, so he won't be forgettin' what I told him."

She was looking closely at him, and she saw a subtle, humorous gleam in his eyes.

"Oh," she said, with a relieved smile, "you are only joking!"

"Sure," he laughed, "that's it." It *was* a joke, though a grim one. He wanted to spare her, and he felt that by arousing her concern for her father — and thus inducing her to keep him at the ranchhouse — he might prevent the tragedy that was sure to follow if Seddon disregarded his warning. For he meant what he had said to Seddon.

Because of Lucia Morell's warning he knew his own life was threatened; and if Seddon should apprize

Compton, Webster, and Kinney of the fact that their intentions were known to him, they would be certain to arrange another trap for him.

His warning to Seddon was no idle one. Beneath the mask of mild gentleness on his face as he looked at the girl was an implacable determination to kill her father should the latter apprize his enemies of his knowledge of their scheme to murder him.

The violent, destroying passions he had inherited from his father were tugging at him as he stood there in the doorway. But the girl saw none of them; they were hidden deep, like a slow fire smoldering in the bowels of the earth, ready to belch forth with the raging fury of a volcano.

She saw only the baffling humor in his eyes, and she decided that between him and her father was some jocose secret, an aspect of which Rand wanted to impress upon her parent through her.

"Very well," she said, her fears at rest; "I shall warn him."

She followed him outside, and when he halted near the door and smiled at her she stood silent and watched him, for she felt he had something more to say to her.

"I reckon — now that you know I ain't what you thought I was — that you won't be afraid to ride over to the Three Bar sometime. It ain't what it was when the

Halseys used to live there, but we'll be glad to treat you to the best we've got."

"Then you know I used to visit the Three Bar?"

"Halsey told me." His grin broadened. "There ain't no girls at the Three Bar now; but there's Aunt Betsey an' Uncle Ephraim an' Bud could entertain you right royal. An' if you're still scared of guys with pink hair an' such, why, I'll just mosey into the brush somewheres where you can't look at me."

"You had no right to permit me to say that!" she declared. "You know it was your fault!"

"Well," he said, "there ain't no harm done."

"Aunt Betsey and Uncle Ephraim and Bud," she said. "They sound good, don't they? They hint of sturdiness and old-fashioned reliability."

"They're all wool an' a yard wide," he stated, his eyes glowing. "My mother's sister an' her husband. They was with me in Durango—after my folks died; an' they've been with me since. Neither of them has got any vicious notions."

"And Bud?"

He regarded her steadily. "Bud is an orphan," he said. "His mother is dead, an' his father didn't feel responsible enough to take care of him. I'm tickled to do it. Bud's a humdinger, ma'am," he added with an enthusiastic leap in his voice; "he's the greatest kid that

ever struck this neck of the woods. An' he ain't got no faults — barrin' his cussin'."

"Cussing!" She betrayed her amazement with a blush and a startled look at him. "Do you mean that he curses?"

"Some," he grinned. "I can't coax it out of him. He don't cuss nothin' mean — it's just words that the boys teach him when I ain't around. An' he's so smart that he picks them up, just like a parrot. I'd thrash them out of him — them swear words, I mean — if I thought I could!"

"Oh, don't do that!" she objected. "I'm sure it wouldn't do any good! Why don't you try to shame him! Can't Aunt Betsey do something — or Uncle Ephraim?"

"They've done all they can, I reckon. He just won't listen. I'm a heap scared that if somethin' ain't done he'll turn into a pirate or somethin', ma'am. An' I've thought, since you come home, that mebbe if you'd ride over once in a while you'd be able to teach him better manners. It would sure be a shame to let him grow up to be a cussin', swaggerin' pirate."

"Well, I certainly shall come over!" she declared.

"That's right, ma'am — he'll need you. Why, I reckon right now that he's pretty near hopeless."

"How old is Bud?" Her eyes were wide with interest now, and a certain crafty gleam in Rand's eyes was bat-

tling with the elation in them. He concealed both expressions by veiling his eyes with his lashes.

"He's between four and five, ma'am — an' big for his age. If it wasn't for his cussin' he'd be pretty much of a man. I reckon I'll have to salivate some of the boys if they don't stop teachin' him them things!"

"Well," she said determinedly, "it is time something was done!"

"You could cure him if anyone can," he said, glancing covertly at her, his voice heavy with conviction.

"Then you'll take a whirl at him, ma'am?" he asked presently, when she did not comment upon his last statement.

"Of course. It would be a shame to let him continue in that habit!"

"So it would, ma'am."

His voice trailed off to an expressionless, mechanical monotone. She was looking directly at him when he spoke, and she saw that his lips had not moved, and she knew he had spoken almost automatically, hardly knowing what he had been saying.

Startled and puzzled, she saw that his gaze was directed toward the front of the house. She turned swiftly, to see her father standing at the edge of the front porch. The man's face was pale, his eyes were gleaming with a bitter light, and one hand was resting on his cartridge belt just

above the butt of his pistol; the other, holding a brier pipe with a smoking bowl, was hooked in the belt at his left side.

He was standing slightly sidewise, the pipe projecting from his fingers. He did not seem to be paying any attention to Rand and his daughter.

But Rand knew he had been paying attention. At the instant Rand had begun to utter the words, "So it would, ma'am," Seddon had dropped his right hand to the butt of his pistol.

He had heard every word spoken by his daughter and Rand; he had stationed himself at the porch edge purposely, to hear what Rand would have to say about the boy. And he had determined that if Rand mentioned the boy he would kill him.

And Rand *had* mentioned the boy. However, the black passion that had swept over Seddon had been so strong as to almost overwhelm him, and he had stood for a long time fighting to regain control of himself. For the dread fear of Rand's deadly marksmanship was in his heart, and he knew that when he drew his gun he must use it quickly and accurately.

And at the instant Rand became aware of Seddon's presence at the edge of the porch, Seddon had decided that the time had come.

Seddon's fingers were encircling the butt of his pistol

when Rand moved. His right hand went to his hip with the rapidity of a striking rattlesnake, flashed upward with the same swiftness and precision. The gleam of his pistol and its crashing report came simultaneously.

Seddon's pipe flew to pieces in his fingers, the stem alone remaining. And Seddon staggered, looking foolishly downward at the remains of the pipe, his eyes vacuous, his mouth open. He seemed to have forgotten the gun at his hip; and he turned his face toward Rand and the girl, looking at them as though amazed to see them.

For an instant the girl stood breathless, both hands pressed tightly over her bosom, looking from Rand to her father, a dread horror in her eyes. But when she saw that Rand did not intend to shoot again; that there was a grin on his face — as though the whole thing were a joke, that he was heartily enjoying — she darted to her father and looked him over, searching for a wound.

She saw no wound — Seddon gave no indication of having been wounded, for he was standing erect, both hands at his side, undoubtedly untouched by the bullet. And, indeed, the girl had seen where the bullet had struck; she still saw the evidence in the shape of the pipestem that Seddon's fingers still gripped.

"You're not hurt, Father?" she demanded, seizing one of his arms and twisting him around so that he faced her.

He shook his head negatively, and the girl left him and walked to Rand, standing before him, her eyes blazing with passion.

"Perhaps you can tell me just what you meant by shooting at my father!" she demanded.

He looked at her steadily, the smile on his face becoming enigmatic.

"I reckon I can," he said; "but I won't. Mebbe I shot the pipe out of his hand to warn him that he has a weak heart, an' that if he goes to gettin' reckless he'll die a heap sudden. An' then mebbe I didn't. I don't feel none talkative right now, an' explanations don't come natural to me. Mebbe your dad will do the explainin'."

He grinned felinely at Seddon, who gave him a pallid sneer; then he looked at the girl, in his eyes the baffling humor that had puzzled her all along.

"I was hopin'," he said evenly. Then he paused, to continue almost instantly: "I reckon Bud will go plumb to the devil now!"

He wheeled and walked to the stable, to vanish around a corner of it. Presently he reappeared, on Midnight, and loped the animal over the river trail toward the Three Bar.

CHAPTER IX

TIME TO CLEAN UP

HOWEVER, Rand did not go to the Three Bar. He rode the river trail until he reached a break in the level he had been riding. Striking a cross-trail, he dipped into a narrow valley, which widened as he proceeded, until at last it grew into a basin of immense proportions.

Half an hour after leaving the Bar S he paused to let Midnight drink at a water-hole; and then he rode on again, the big black horse traveling steadily at a pace that soon brought horse and rider to a level where a herd of cattle was grazing.

Skirting the fringe of the herd, Rand came upon the outfit wagon, standing near another water-hole. Rand had seen several men of the Three Bar among the cattle as he rode up; but he was looking for Larry Redfern, his range boss. And when he saw him standing near his horse close to the outfit wagon, he veered Midnight, rode to where Redfern was standing, and slipped out of the saddle.

Larry Redfern was tall and slender, clean-shaven, and square-jawed. His face was wrinkled genially, and the

little creases at the corners of his eyes bore eloquent testimony of the quick humor that characterized him. His steel-blue eyes, though, had a level directness in them that warned men that they might trespass too far upon the geniality that radiated from him; and the firm set to his lips indicated that he was a man of tenacity and indomitable purpose.

He grinned at Rand as the latter slid from the saddle and confronted him—the grin of sincere friendship.

"I seen you hittin' the breeze quite some early," he said, his eyes twinkling. "Lookin' for strays, mebbe. They're rather scarce, though, for the boys have been ridin' a heap close on them lately.

"It wasn't strays," said Rand.

"Shucks," drawled Redfern; "I wasn't reckonin' it was—not too strong! Didn't she give you no daisy to sport in a buttonhole?"

"She wasn't allowin' she was handin' out any bokays this mornin'," returned Rand. He smiled at the other, but there was a glint of disappointment in his eyes that was not unnoticed by Redfern.

"So she wouldn't decorate you none! An' you thinkin' of her, an' talkin' of her for four years! I'd call that mighty stingy of her!" Redfern grinned toward the rimming hills in the distance and hummed in a dismal monotone:

My girl she's gone an' left me;
She's travelin' now by rail.
She ain't allowin' to poke along
No more on the old cow trail.

She got herself a drummer-man;
A dude with a flowin' tie.
She ——

Glancing sidelong at Rand, he broke off and turned.

"Hell!" he said; "it's somethin' else!"

And then, the spirit of levity falling from him like a mask, he looked at Rand, his face set in stern, rigid lines.

"It's Compton!" he said.

"Now you're guessin'" grinned Rand, his eyes gleaming with a light that made Redfern draw a long, full breath. "They've framed up on me — in Ocate. I didn't take the trouble to get a bill of sale from Mellert when I bought Midnight from him, an' they're chargin' me with stealin' him." Then he related what had occurred at the Bar S, and Redfern's bronzed face wreathed into a smile of delight.

"That's foolin' them!" he declared. "An' you shot the old maverick's pipe out of his fingers, eh?" His eyes gleamed wickedly. "I reckon that if I'd been doin' the shootin' — sayin' I could sling my gun that way — I'd have planted a slug in his breadbasket!"

"I wasn't aimin' to kill him," smiled Rand mirthlessly; "I was just warnin' him. I saw him goin' for his gun, an' there was sure murder in his eyes. I reckon, before I get through with him, I'll have to kill him."

Redfern looked keenly at his employer, and saw the troubled light in his eyes. He had joked about the girl a few minutes before, but he knew the girl had made a deep impression upon Rand — for there had been times during the last four years when Rand had intimated as much. But Redfern said nothing, for this was one of those situations in which advice — or even sympathy — is not to be offered without solicitation.

He listened attentively, however, the lines of his face growing grim and his eyes glowing with passion, while Rand related what he had heard from Lucia Morell.

"Hell's fire!" he broke out when Rand concluded. "It's time for a clean-up! Look here, Rand," he added, "you leave this to me an' the boys!"

"Was you thinkin' I was gettin' ready to leave the country?" Rand's smile was a mixture of amusement and bitterness. "Oh, don't," he added.

Redfern looked downward, not meeting his employer's gaze, which would have confused and embarrassed him. For Redfern knew as well as Rand that the rules of conduct in this country forbade what he had proposed. Rand must not seek to evade a meeting with the gunfighter.

For Seddon, Compton, and Webster would not hesitate to disseminate the news of his refusal. And he could not plead ignorance as an excuse, for Seddon knew he was aware of the plot that had been made to trap him — and he knew that if he failed to go alone to Ocate, Seddon would talk.

However, there was no desire in his mind to escape a meeting with Kinney. From the instant he had heard the news from Lucia Morell, he had known that he would go to Ocate with the deliberate purpose of meeting Kinney. Upon one point only was his mind unsettled, and that was concerning his treatment of the gunfighter.

And he could not decide — for the coldly furious yearning in his heart to slay the man was opposed by a recollection of the gentle precepts of his mother's teaching. He knew he was going to Ocate, and he knew also that he would not decide the question that was in his mind until he was face to face with the gunfighter.

Redfern did not answer, and Rand's smile, as he looked at the other's averted face, was eloquent with gratitude and understanding. When Rand was in his present mood his face bore a strong resemblance to the woman of the photograph at which he often gazed — there was the same luminous softness of the eyes, with a yearning wistfulness gleaming far back in them.

It was an expression that Redfern had never seen, for

Redfern's back had always received it. Face to face with his friend, Rand always masked the expression with cynicism and heavy tolerance.

"So you was thinkin' I'd run out of my responsibilities, eh?" he gibed when at last Redfern turned. "When did I ever give you any sign that I'd turn yellow?"

Redfern grinned guiltily, for he knew from Rand's tone that he had divined the sentiment that was behind his proffer of assistance. Yet no more than Rand did he permit his words to indicate the state of his feelings.

"You're a plumb damn fool!" he declared gruffly. "Slim Kinney's the slickest gunman in this part of the country. He'll salivate you!"

"There's a chance, of course," said Rand gravely. "I reckon that's why I took it into my head to gas to you about it. I've heard of Slim Kinney—an' I know his tricks. Now, knowin' his tricks, or not, if my guns would snag, or I'd miss them when I go after them, why, it's dead certain Bud wouldn't have no dad any more."

He looked straight at Redfern, his smile grave. Redfern scowled, for it seemed to him that there was a presentiment of evil in Rand's heart. Redfern's breath labored in his lungs with the constriction that seemed to be there. But even though he divined that this might be a final parting with his friend, he could not let him know of the affection he felt.

"What you gettin' at?" he demanded gruffly.

"Why, shucks," said Rand, with a smile which told that he was not fooled by Redfern's manner, "it comes to this: If Kinney gets me, you'll have to be Bud's dad. An' I'm askin' you to take good care of him — an' don't let Seddon come near him!"

Redfern started, and his eyes gleamed with the dawning of an amazed understanding.

"Hell's fire!" he exclaimed. "Is Seddon ——"

Rand grinned. He wheeled, climbed into the saddle, and set his face toward Ocate. Ten feet from Redfern — who stood rigid, his hands clenched, his glowing eyes reflecting emotions — that could not be expressed in speech — Rand flung over his shoulder a curt "So-long."

He looked back — furtively and swiftly — when he reached the crest of a far rise, and saw Redfern standing at a little distance from his horse, watching him.

Rand's jaws set, he smiled with ineffable gentleness, and rode onward, toward town.

CHAPTER X

KINNEY MAKES READY

HALF an hour later, when Midnight scrambled to the crest of a long rise and was brought to a halt at the edge of a great level which swept away in three directions into a distance so vast that the eye ached in an effort to comprehend it, Ocate lay before horse and rider.

Ocate snuggled a little timber clump that skirted the bank of a shallow arroyo which trickled water over its rock bottom the year through, and from the distance at which Rand now viewed the town it seemed to be no more than a dingy blot upon the calm surface of an emerald sea. Later the green would change to a dusty brown, and the bare sand stretches would show white and dry; the desert weeds would droop; the grass would curl wearily, discouraged; and the dry, light, feathery alkali dust would contest with the hideous cacti for supremacy.

But spring reigned now. And yet it was not to fill his senses with the beauty of the picture that lay behind him that Rand twisted in the saddle and looked back. For it was not the first time he had gazed into the basin from this vantage point.

Disclosed to his view was a vast world of virgin land,

its farther reaches hazy in the distance where some thrusting hills met the azure horizon; a shimmering green world, mighty and vast and silent. Through it all ran a silver ribbon of water — a sinuous trail, as though some giant serpent had passed.

Like a mighty map it lay, with its hills and other elevations in high relief; its depressions dark; its trees dwarfed to the size of bushes by the height from which Rand viewed them; its huge bowlders and rock spires seeming like pebbles.

Over it all was a slumbering peace — like that which must have encompassed the world upon the first dawn of its creation.

Straining his eyes, shading them with a hand, Rand could dimly discern the outfit wagon and the herd of cattle dotting the floor of the basin. He was not sure — until he saw movement near the outfit wagon; and then he knew Redfern was waving something at him in final parting. He smiled faintly and rode on — for he had seen what he wanted to see.

And now, as Rand urged Midnight forward, his face grew hard, his eyes malignant, his thoughts wanton and abysmal. In sharp, amazing contrast to the gentle cynicism — a mask for his real emotions when talking with Redfern — he now yielded to the ruthless, destroying passions that had seized him; and for a long time, as

he rode forward, they seethed and raged through him.

All his life he had fought those violent passions, but never had he fought them as hard as he was fighting them now. For until now no man had provoked him as the men waiting for him in town had provoked him. They had planned this thing deliberately, with murderous intent, with a cunning that must have resulted in victory for them had it not been for Lucia Morell.

It was this knowledge which had aroused him; which had fired his blood — the Rand blood, his father's legacy — to the point of violent, unrecking action. And he knew that when he faced "Slim" Kinney in town he would kill him, if he could.

He knew that he could not hope to fight the blood-lust longer, for it had conquered him. He knew it! For the face of his father appeared before him now — as he remembered it, and as it appeared in the photograph that adorned the wall at the Three Bar. And the cruel eyes were glowing with approval and silent applause — and Rand smiled at the mental picture — smiled, his lips curving with a bitter sneer — a sneer for all good impulses; a visible flouting of the gospel of goodwill; in the sneer was contempt for all men who advocated repression; for those who supinely submit to the aggressions of their enemies. And, also, it was a sneer for his mother's memory and for the doctrine of gentleness she had preached.

For he was no longer of his mother's blood. His father was now dominating him — and he rode toward town, eager, exultant — the grim recklessness of his thoughts reflected in his eyes, which were glowing with the wantonness of destruction.

Slim Kinney had greeted the dawn with a speculative eye. Would this day bring Beaudry Rand to "town?"

Kinney hoped it would. For Kinney was a killer of men, who delighted in his profession. And this was the first time in his life that he would be able to kill under the protection of the law. It was an innovation, an astounding reversal of the conditions under which he always had done his killing, and he was eager to experience the venomous thrill he knew it would give him.

He grinned cruelly when, after descending the stairs that led from the room on the upper floor of the Rialto Hotel, in which he had passed the night, he leaned against a corner of the building and watched the sun climb over the peaks of a distant line of hills — the same hills that rimmed the basin in which, at about the time Kinney stood in front of the Rialto, Rand was taking leave of Larry Redfern.

Ocate was asleep when Kinney descended to the street; and in the sepulchral silence which enveloped the town, Kinney drew out his guns and examined them, grinning

his cruel grin. For Kinney took good care of his guns — they were the props of his existence, and he never knew when he might want to use them. Experience had taught him to be prepared.

Restoring the weapons to their holsters, he looked down at his vest, upon which gleamed a small, round badge with the words "Deputy Sheriff" engraved upon it. Kinney grinned again, and with one end of the scarlet scarf that encircled his neck, he polished the bit of metal until it flashingly reflected the first rays of the morning sun.

Kinney took some pride in his personal appearance. His boots were well polished; his corduroy trousers were neatly stuffed into the soft leather tops of the boots; his woolen shirt was clean, and his face smooth-shaven.

Despite these virtues, however, Kinney looked what he was — a conscienceless killer of men.

There was no softening quality in his cruel eyes. His mouth was truculent, with thin lips that drooped at the corners; his nose was long and slender, and depressed at the tip, where it joined the upper lip; and there was a slouching droop to his shoulders which gave the impression of lazy carelessness.

Later, in the street, Kinney was joined by Compton.

Compton had taken a room at the Gilt Edge for the night, and despite the dissipation of the night before, he looked fresh and sleek.

"Expecting Rand in today?" was his question after greeting the gunfighter.

Kinney grinned wolfishly. "There's no tellin'," he said. "He might take a notion to ride in. Anyway, I'm keepin' my eyes peeled."

"Drinking?" suggested Compton, moving his head slightly toward one of the saloons.

"Not none," said the gunfighter. "I'm keepin' a clear head."

Compton's eyes gleamed. "That's right; don't take any chances."

The town was shaking off its lethargy. Sounds began to smite the flatness of the still morning air — doors were opening; somewhere a woman laughed; the sound of men's voices filtered through the wall of the building behind Compton and Kinney, and there came to the ears of both men a heavy clumping upon the board floors within. Ocate was awakening.

"If you think you're needing any help," began Compton. He paused when he saw Kinney's lips curl.

"If you was thinkin' I was needin' help you wouldn't have hired me for this job," shallowly grinned the gunman. "I reckon I'll play her a lone hand."

He took leave of Compton presently and entered a restaurant, where he ate heartily.

There was not the slightest nervousness in Kinney's

manner — he was cool, composed, saturnine. Complacently, coldly, confidently, he regarded the faces of men he saw in the restaurant near him. He grinned broadly at the waitress who served him — so significantly that a crimson stain appeared in the girl's cheeks, inured though she was to the brazenness of men; he joked with the proprietor when he nonchalantly paid his bill at the desk; and he stepped out into the street unconcerned over the prospect of murder, calmly picking his teeth as he glanced down the street.

For though Kinney had looked upon fear, he had never experienced the sensation. He had seen it in men's eyes when he had drawn his guns to kill them — they had exhibited it nakedly in those moments — and he had gloated over them. But he had never known what it was to fear a gun in another man's hand.

Knowing his own ability with the six-shooter — having practised the slippery, snakelike motion that enabled him to get his weapons into action in a shorter space of time than any man he ever had met — he felt the dead certainty of victory in every encounter. He had begun to believe himself invincible, unconquerable. He had become a hardened, calloused, and egotistical disciple of self, answerable only to the malevolent passions that gripped him — the passions that were now gripping him.

He had thrown the toothpick from him, and was wiping

his mouth with a big red bandanna handkerchief, when he heard a voice behind him — a hoarse, low whisper:

"He is coming!"

He turned swiftly, to see Compton standing in a doorway at his back. He grinned evilly, deliberately restoring the handkerchief to its pocket as he stepped out toward the hitching rail that skirted the sidewalk.

He observed that Ocate had completely shaken off its lethargy; that many men were on the street, and that several horses were standing at the various hitching rails in front of the buildings.

And then, with seeming carelessness, he dropped his hands to his sides, sweeping the butts of his pistols with his long, sensitive fingers — and faced to the eastern edge of town. At a little distance out on the big grass level he saw a horseman who rode loosely in the saddle — a tall, lithe man on a big black horse.

The black horse was coming steadily — not fast, but seeming to cover the ground easily and without effort. And yet, despite his lack of visible exertion, it was not many minutes before Kinney saw the black horse at the edge of town. And then a voice floating to Kinney from a point near where the black horse had halted, greeted the rider hilariously:

"Hello, Rand — you ol' son-of-a-gun!"

Kinney grinned sneeringly at the greeting. But the

rider of the black horse came on again, heading the animal to the hitching rail in front of the Gilt Edge—where he dismounted, trailing the reins over the head of the beast. For an instant he stood, looking down the street. Then he walked toward Kinney.

CHAPTER XI

FIRE AND ICE

RAND had not conquered the terrible passions that had gripped him when he had sat on Midnight at the edge of the big plain gazing down into the mighty basin where Redfern stood. They still ruled him, paling his face with their intensity.

Outwardly he was coldly deliberate, and no man, watching him as he walked toward Kinney — noting the faint, mirthless smile on his face — would have divined that he had come to town to kill a man. Nor did Kinney, watching him with the furtive alertness of a carrion bird in the clutch of the hunger-lust, see anything in Rand's manner to warn him that the man was aware of the plot to kill him. For there was in Rand's eyes as he reached Kinney nothing but a gleam of casual inquiry. At least, so it seemed to the gunfighter.

Rand seemed about to pass Kinney — and the gunfighter did not intend to molest Rand yet — for he was in no hurry — when he halted within a step of Kinney and said, slowly, his gaze meeting the gunfighter's, and holding it:

"Seen Webster around?"

Kinney's lips curved into a cold sneer. He had meant to delay, in order to watch Rand — to note the peculiarities of his movements; to acquaint himself with any eccentricity of muscular development he might have — a thing that would show in the way he handled himself; in the way he walked or moved his arms — anything that would indicate the probable speed with which he could get his guns out. For Kinney had not failed to see that Rand wore two guns, and that it seemed, from their positions — low on his hips, with the bottoms of the holsters tied down — that Rand knew how to use them.

Kinney had meant to delay, but Rand's question had provided him with an opportunity he sought, and he could see no reason why he should not get the thing over with as quickly as possible.

Therefore, as he sneered, his eyes glowing with a savage truculence, he backed away slightly, to give himself room to draw his guns.

His hands went to his hips as he edged slightly sidewise in the backward movement; and into his eyes came the merciless, sardonic glitter that told, more eloquently than words, of the bitter lust in his heart.

Rand had not failed to note the movement and the flame in the man's eyes. Therefore he divined that this man was Slim Kinney; and he knew that Kinney had decided to draw his guns upon the slightest pretext.

But nothing in Rand's manner betrayed his knowledge of what threatened. He was going to kill Kinney, he knew; in his veins still surged the violent yearning, the eagerness to take the life of the man who stood before him. And yet about him was no sign of the inward fire that was searing him; and as he looked at Kinney over the short space that separated them, he seemed unperturbed, unsuspicious, and serenely calm.

Watching him closely, however, Kinney had detected a quickening of Rand's eyes, and he knew that despite Rand's unsuspicious manner, he had not failed to suspect what impended.

But the gunfighter delayed. He saw that several men had halted and were watching from various points; he saw that Rand's hands were hanging loosely at his sides, as though he had no thought of his guns. And with witnesses present, Kinney did not care to make the first aggressive movement. So he stood, the fingers of his hands hooked in his cartridge belt, watching Rand, confident that when he had goaded Rand into reaching for his weapons, he would beat him by the infinitesimal fraction of a second which would be necessary for victory.

But a silence came between them, during which neither man's glance wavered. They stood, with the few feet of space between them, looking at each other, while around them all sound ceased, and the men who had halted to

watch, knowing tragedy impended, stood rigid, like graven images — set figures in a grim pantomimic scene.

And as the silence continued, a slight perturbation began to afflict Kinney. Rand knew what impended; for Rand's eyes advertised that he knew — they were agleam with complete knowledge. Kinney could see the knowledge. To be sure, the knowledge was veiled by the flame of a wanton passion in Rand's eyes; but it was there. And if Rand knew, and could betray such icy composure in the face of death, why didn't he reach for his guns — why didn't he move his hands just the merest trifle, to give Kinney the chance he awaited?

But Rand's hands did not move. Nor did his eyes waver. Kinney caught a slight quiver of Rand's lips — they curved just a little, twitching with a sneering contempt.

Ordinarily, such an expression upon an enemy's face would have stung Kinney to action. But in this instance there seemed to be a great drag upon Kinney's desires, a queer cooling of the passion into which he had worked himself. He became aware of a slight, disturbing chill at the pit of his stomach; his eyes wavered just a little as Rand's gaze continued to bore into them; and he could feel the chill stealing from his middle, traveling upward until it began to crawl up his neck and into his face.

Still Rand made no move. Not a muscle of his face,

hands, or the cords of his neck — visible above and below the brown scarf he wore — were agitated, except from his slow, regular breathing.

A miracle was here presented to Kinney — the spectacle of a man facing death — knowing it, and betraying not the slightest sign of emotion!

Never before had so odd a thing happened to Kinney! The men he had killed — who had suspected his intentions — had invariably betrayed emotion. Sometimes it had taken the form of complete paralysis; some of his victims had shrunk from him, in the grip of a hopelessness that had made them craven and helpless; still others, sensing the inevitable, had desperately tried to beat him to the draw, their faces demoniac with impotent rage and hate.

But this man betrayed absolutely no sign of emotion. More — Kinney could see that Rand was deliberately delaying the crisis; that he, too, was confident — supremely confident — of his ability in getting his guns into action swiftly. For there was in Rand's eyes and in his manner an air of certainty, of complete conviction, that he would emerge victorious from the encounter that impended.

And suddenly, as Kinney stood silent, his thumbs hooked in his cartridge belt, Rand spoke:

"You're Slim Kinney — eh?" he said coldly. His

voice expressed the contempt that had twitched his lips. "An' you've got a warrant for me — for horse-stealin'. An' you're yearnin' to work your guns on me. Pull 'em — you sneak!"

Kinney did not obey; he stood, his face pallid, his eyes vacuous, staring at Rand as though fascinated by something he saw in the man's manner. Over him had stolen the conviction that it would be impossible for his hands to travel the little distance that separated them from his guns before Rand's weapons would be barking death at him. For though his hands were at the cartridge belt, it seemed to him that many feet, instead of inches, intervened between his hands and the guns.

And while he stood, puzzled over the phenomenon, he saw one of Rand's hands move swiftly, and a piece of paper fluttered in the air and then fell almost at his feet. And then Rand's voice, coming with a snapping command, startled him, so that he took an involuntary step backward, dropping his hands to his sides.

"Pick that up an' read it!" said Rand.

Obediently, though amazed that he should do so, Kinney stooped and took up the paper. It was the bill of sale given Rand that morning by Amos Seddon.

After Kinney finished reading, he silently handed the paper to Rand; and the latter took it, stuffed it into a pocket and sneered malignantly at the gunfighter.

"You was lookin' for me," he said to Kinney as he took a step toward the man. "You figured to perforate me, pretendin' I'd resist arrest. I've called the law bluff. If you've got any man in you, you'll flash your guns — now! I'm yearnin' to blow you apart!"

Kinney did not "flash" his guns. Instead, he stood, his hands at his sides, a sullen, bitter pout on his lips, his eyes gleaming with furious, impotent rage.

For an instant Rand stood, watching the gunfighter; then, with an exclamation of disgust, he wheeled, turning his left side toward Kinney.

As he did so his right hand slipped to the butt of the gun at his right hip — for he had a sudden divination that Kinney would shoot as he turned.

He had correctly judged the gunfighter's character.

For at the instant he wheeled, Kinney's right hand went to his holster. Rand's movement had broken the spell that had held Kinney, and he pulled the trigger viciously.

The weapon went off as its muzzle cleared the holster — the bullet throwing up sand a little to Rand's left. But, blended with the report of Kinney's weapon came Rand's reply — so that the two guns seemed to roar simultaneously.

Kinney's weapon loosened in his grasp; the hand holding it was knocked backward, as though it had been jerked by some unseen force — for Rand's bullet had struck the

moment came — and he knew that Kinney, after the first glance, also realized it. It had been when the sarcastic smile had begun to appear on Rand's face that the mental picture of his mother flashed before him. And the sarcasm he felt had been directed at himself — it was the savage cynicism of his father sneering at the maternal influences that had conquered him. So, fighting — and losing — the bitter battle, he had merely wounded Kinney.

It had been the same way when he had gone into the Gilt Edge. Thoughts of his mother had influenced him while he had been talking with Webster; but as soon as he stepped into the street a new savage impulse had seized him, and he had determined to kill Compton when he had entered the saloon.

But there, again, had his mother's face appeared before him — he had been looking at her when he had stuck the muzzle of his gun into Compton's side.

He had known, then, that he dared not yield to the violent impulses that had driven him to town — for had he done so the reproach in his mother's eyes would have haunted him all the days of his life. Nor, never again would he have been able to look at the picture of her — the picture that adorned the wall of his room at the Three Bar.

Therefore the mingled emotions of victory and defeat assailed him as he stood on the brow of the hill overlook-

ing the big basin; but they were emotions out of which he could gain no consolation. For when he had faced Compton in the saloon — after he had decided not to use the gun that was making a dent in the man's side — after he had conquered the yearning to kill — he had not dared to knock Compton down, for fear the blow would arouse the blood-lust again and he would yield to it.

He had done then what he thought was the wise thing — he had grimly closed his ears to Compton's insults; he had fled from the temptation to slay.

But now the shame of his decision was upon him; and the bitter curses that issued from between his clenched teeth, the flaming scorn and contempt of self that gleamed in his eyes, told how bitterly he regretted the weakness that had come over him in town.

He climbed into the saddle presently, pale, his jaws set, and his eyes glowing with a brooding, sullen light; sending Midnight slowly down the slope.

And when he reached the floor of the basin he saw that Larry Redfern had not moved very far from where he had stood when Rand had last seen him — he was leaning against the outfit wagon, his back to Rand, apparently not having seen or heard Rand coming toward him.

He turned, though — swiftly — as Rand rode close to him; his right hand dropping to the holster at his hip. On Redfern's face, too, there was a sullen expression — a

savage truculence which told of the bitterness of his thoughts.

And his first words revealed what those thoughts had been; for when he flashed around and saw Rand, his face lighted, and he fairly yelled at Rand:

"You old son-of-a-gun! You got him!"

In an instant he was at Rand's side, gripping one of his hands, trying to pull Rand off his horse. And when Rand resisted, pulling back, his face flaming with the shame of the thing that had happened to him, Redfern squeezed the captured hand hard and looked gleefully up into Rand's face.

"You old son-of-a-gun! I never thought you could do it! Tell me about it, you close-mouthed Apache! Tell me how you done it? Don't set there blushin' like a house afire, keepin' me in suspense! Spit it out!"

"Kinney ain't dead," said Rand. "I busted his hand —that's all. I couldn't kill him—he looked too—too easy, I reckon."

"Easy! Oh—why, hell's fire! Easy? Kinney easy?" Redfern's voice grew low and awed; he pushed his hat back and brushed his forehead with a hand, amazed, stunned. "You busted Kinney's hand—an' you say he's easy! Good Lord! I knowed you was slick—but—Kinney!"

Rand grinned without mirth. "I was goin' to kill him,"

he confessed; "but when I'd knocked his gun out of his hand — snappin' a shot at it when he tried to draw, when my back was turned — an' he stood there, goin' for his other gun, an' lookin' so white an' scared — I didn't have the nerve to kill him. An' later, when I got Compton in the Gilt Edge, I didn't have the nerve to kill him, either. He wouldn't draw his gun. I've sure made a mess of this deal," he concluded bitterly.

"Holy smoke!" breathed Redfern; "no nerve! He goes to town, deliberate — not lettin' me go with him — to meet Slim Kinney — with Kinney waitin' to kill him. He knocks Kinney's gun to smithereens, an' busts Kinney's hand — makin' a tenderfoot sucker out of the slickest gun-fighter in the country. Then he busts into the Gilt Edge — with everything ag'in him, an' scares Link Compton so that he don't know he's got a gun! An' then he comes back here an' yaps disappointed like, because he ain't got no nerve. Hell's fire — what does he call nerve — that's what I'd like to know?"

Redfern asked his questions of the yawning distance, as though that distance were a third person.

But his enthusiasm was answered by a saturnine smile from Rand. He said lowly: "I had to tell you;" wheeled his horse and rode away, toward the Three Bar, leaving Redfern to look after him in puzzled astonishment.

CHAPTER XV

SWEARING TO A LIE

RAND'S temperament was not volatile; there was no infirmity of purpose in his moods; and of the two influences which shaped his conduct toward his fellowmen, that exerted by his mother's memory was the stronger. She had trained him, had warned him; and he was dominated by the gentle impulses she had bequeathed him. It was only when he was goaded and provoked by antagonistic forces that the turbulent, maddening passions seized him; and even then he fought grimly to conquer.

Men had seen those passions slumbering in him. Larry Redfern knew of their existence — for in those moments when he and Rand were together, with the gentleness of a trusting friendship between them, Redfern had seen the hard glint far back in the man's eyes.

But Larry Redfern knew — as Uncle Ephraim and Aunt Betsy knew — that Rand normally was ruled by the better impulses of his nature; they knew, too, that he fought continually to overcome the vicious moods that seized him. Uncle Ephraim and Aunt Betsey, aware of the legacy of savagery, pitied him; but Redfern, knowing that in all men reigned much that was elemental — a

vicious strain that at times sent their thoughts back to the abysmal period—smiled wisely at Rand's moods.

He was convinced that the impulses of the primal man were somewhat stronger in Rand than in many other men—that was all. Aroused, Rand was cynical, malignant, dangerous; but that mood conquered, he was gravely gentle, soft-spoken, with a slow humor that had endeared him to his relatives and to his men.

Rand spent two or three days overcoming the venomous thoughts that racked his soul. During this time he was absent a great deal from the ranchhouse, spending much of his time with the outfit on the open range.

Several times, brooding over what had happened to him in Ocate, he was on the point of yielding to impulses to return and complete the work he had begun, but each time a recollection of Redfern's words dissuaded him. If Redfern could see nothing shameful in his conduct it must be that his own mental vision was at fault. For Larry had the disturbing habit of speaking plainly, without prejudice.

At any rate, Rand's mood slowly changed. His face, set in grim lines, began to relax; the cold, hard gleam in his eyes began to soften. And one day, on his way to the ranchhouse, he grinned widely at the space and the silence.

He had reflected much over Kinney—he kept seeing the man's face as it had been in the moments preceding the

shooting. Blank stupefaction had been in the man's eyes.

"I reckon he was plumb scared!" Rand told himself as he rode homeward. "If I had showed that kind of 'yellow'—now!"

Then he laughed, audibly. For his thoughts went to Compton. For, despite Compton's manner, there had been something akin to fear in *his* eyes, too, when they had met Rand's, in the saloon.

Rand was convinced that one day he and Compton must settle their differences—that was inevitable. For their hatred of each other was like some strong poison. And one day, when the feeling between them grew intolerable, they would clash.

But Rand's thoughts this afternoon did not long remain on Compton and Kinney. He kept thinking of Eleanor Seddon, and the blazing flame in her eyes when he had shot Seddon's pipe out of his hand.

He wondered much over the incident, and over what had happened after he had ridden away.

He knew Seddon—Seddon had no moral courage. Would Seddon betray him? He thought not. For Seddon would not want the girl to know about Bud. To be sure, *he* would not tell Eleanor about the boy, even if Seddon were to poison the girl's mind against him—for he would not want the girl to suffer the humiliation the knowledge would bring upon her.

But Seddon would *think* he would tell, and that fear would compel Seddon to silence regarding the hostility between them. Seddon would make some plausible explanation for the shooting of the pipe—that was certain.

And if Seddon *did* explain, what would follow? Why, Eleanor Seddon, her doubts removed, would keep her promise to ride over to the Three Bar for the purpose of reforming Bud! For Rand had seen that implacable purpose in her eyes!

And Bud! Rand grinned widely as he neared the house.

Unsaddling Midnight, and turning the animal into the corral, he entered the house.

Uncle Ephraim was seated on the back steps, smoking, and talking confidentially to Bud. Aunt Betsy was seated at the kitchen table, peeling potatoes.

She heard Rand come in the side door, and she looked furtively at him over the tops of her spectacles as he halted in the doorway that led from the kitchen to the dining-room. There was a grin on Rand's face, and by that token Aunt Betsey knew he had conquered the dark passions that for days had beset him. For she had heard from Larry Redfern the story of what had happened at Ocate.

Rand had not mentioned the incident, and had it not been for Larry, Aunt Betsey would not have known there had been trouble, for though, when Rand had been in

the house, he had been silent and thoughtful, there had been no change in his manner toward Aunt Betsey, Uncle Ephraim, or Bud. But that grin told Aunt Betsey many things, and she answered it with a smile in which there was a devout thankfulness.

And she thrilled with emotion when Rand walked to her, placed a sinewy arm around her shoulders and hugged her silently.

"You're a regular bear, Beaudry!" she exclaimed when he released her. She raised her head and looked up at him, her eyes shining. "I'm awfully glad you didn't," she said.

"Didn't what?" He glanced quickly at her.

"Glad you didn't kill that Ocate gunfighter. Don't you ever, Beaudry! Whatever happens, don't do that! I've heard your father say, many times, that once you start—once you kill a man in passion—you can't stop killing. It's like an appetite for strong drink; it takes hold of you, your father said, and makes you drunk. And there are always men who will dare you and defy you and taunt and mock you—to make you kill. There'll be gunmen who will be jealous of you; who will——"

"Who's been talkin'?" inquired Rand. He seized her face in both his hands. "Larry?" he questioned.

She nodded. "He was *so* tickled!" she declared. "He said he just couldn't help telling me!"

Rand grinned. "I'll be tellin' Larry somethin'," he threatened.

"Shucks, you won't!" she laughed.

Rand left her and strode to the door. "You had any visitors besides Larry?" he called back to Aunt Betsey over his shoulder.

"Nobody but Larry and one of the men."

Rand bent down and seized Bud about the middle, swinging him upward to his shoulder, the boy grinning hugely from his elevation.

"We're goin' to look at the horses, Bud," said Rand as he strode out of the house.

They did look at the horses. Rand perched Bud on the top rail of the corral fence and, with the sinking sun behind them, they watched the several animals within the enclosure, as, with the knowledge that they were observed, they whipped the deep dust of the place until it rose in clouds.

Bud had had curls; the evidence of them still existed on the top of his head. The top of his head, however, was the only place where their presence might have been detected, for elsewhere his hair was cut short, "like a man's," at his own request.

Manliness was in Bud's manner as he sat on the fence watching, with a critical eye, the movements of the horses. His little lips were tight-set, his eyes gleaming.

"Some day I'm goin' to ride that there mustard horse!" he told Rand.

"You sure are — some day!" assured the latter. "An' that day ain't goin' to be long in comin'. For," he added, with a shrewd look at Bud, his eyes gleaming with a guilty, shameful expression for the thing he was about to do, "you're pretty much of a man right now, ain't you?"

The boy nodded, and Rand continued slowly:

"You like that mustard horse, eh?" he said. "You ain't got any use for that damned monkey-faced sorrel?"

The boy shot a quick glance at Rand's face; it was expressionless. It was also very red, but Bud did not see that, for he was looking at Rand's face for signs. There were no signs. But Bud thought Rand was breathing heavily.

Bud looked at the sorrel horse and then again at Rand's face. It was the first time he had ever heard a profane word. For Rand's command regarding the use of profanity within hearing distance of the boy had been vigorous, and the outfit had religiously obeyed him. Of course, Uncle Ephraim and Aunt Betsey did not swear.

Bud wondered if he had quite understood Rand. He looked intently at Rand, and Rand saw the question in his eyes.

"You ain't got any use for that damned monkey-faced sorrel, eh?" repeated Rand.

"I wouldn't ride any damned monkey-faced sorrel!" declared the boy.

Rand buried his face in his arms, and Bud did not see the unholy mirth that suffused it. Nor did Bud see any of the expressions that wreathed Rand's face, as with diabolical craft and suggestion he continued to teach the youngster proficiency in the art of profane expression.

There came a time, after a while, when Bud's proficiency became established, when Rand took the boy from the fence and sent him into the house.

Standing at the stable door, Rand looked through the glowing twilight toward the space that stretched toward the Bar S.

"I reckon she won't ketch me in a lie about Bud's swearin'," he said, grinning hugely, though guiltily.

CHAPTER XVI

AN INTERLUDE WITH CUPID

UPON Silver, the horse that had taken her to the timber in which she had first met Beaudry Rand, Eleanor was riding toward the Three Bar to keep her promise to instill into Bud's mind a horror for all things profane.

It was several days following that upon which Rand had cunningly tutored Bud; and in the interval between the day of the teaching and that upon which Miss Seddon was riding toward the Three Bar, Bud had spent much of his spare time seated on the top rail of the fence near the gate, gravely swearing at the animals within the enclosure.

He was there today; he had been there for many minutes, following the movements of the sorrel horse with frowning glances. He had not seen Miss Seddon coming toward him across the plains; he did not see her, nor hear her, when she at last rode up to the corral gate and sat silently in the saddle, looking at him.

Bud's gingham pinafore — today a pink one — was immaculate, for Aunt Betsey had been apprized of Miss Seddon's determination to visit Bud — though Rand had not

mentioned the real reason for her proposed visit — and Aunt Betsey had kept the boy spick and span in anticipation of the event.

And so Bud looked invitingly fresh. It did not take Miss Seddon an instant to warm toward him; and she sat in the saddle, smiling at his back with a tenderness which Bud would have appreciated had he seen.

But Bud's thoughts and attentions were gravely centered upon the sorrel horse. He had come to the conclusion that the sorrel was what Rand had said it was. And now, for the twentieth time, he was gravely expressing his opinion.

"You're a damned monkey-faced sorrel!" he said; "an' I wouldn't ride you — so there!"

Bud said more. For a child, unused to a new language, he did well. With a fluency born of a keen liking for the picturesque method of expression, he nobly set to work to defame the sorrel. So complete was his work that it caused the lady behind him to grow speechless with amazement.

She got down silently, her face crimson, and stealthily approached the criminal. And the first Bud knew of her presence was when he felt a soft hand on his shoulder, and a softer voice whispering into his ear:

"Little boy — Bud; you mustn't say those naughty things!"

Bud twisted on the post top and surveyed the lady wonderingly. He never had seen a girl quite like the one who was close to him now; never had he thought there was so much beauty and winsomeness in *any* girl. And so Bud's thoughts grew shamefully confused. He wanted to be a man, like his father, and those swear words sounded big and important to the ear; they had a snap and a resonance all their own. But somehow, there was that in the lady's reproaching and rebuking eyes which convinced him, almost, that the words should not be used.

But Bud was loyal to his father, and he bravely straightened.

"Why?" he protested.

"God doesn't like little boys who swear," the lady informed him gently.

"I don't like that damned monkey-faced sorrel!" declared Bud, unimpressed.

The lady tried a new trick; she was cunningly resourceful.

"Bud," she said, smiling sweetly at him, "I'm afraid I won't like you if you say that again."

Bud smirked uncertainly. He wanted the lady to like him, and yet he wanted to be a man. Still, there was a coldness in the expression of the lady's face which warned him that if he persisted he would lose her; and so the smirk became a broad, winning smile.

"I won't say it again," he conceded.

Instantly the lady smiled with him, and he impulsively hugged her as she lifted him down from the post.

He watched her as she threw the reins over Silver's head, looping them around the post upon which he had been sitting; then she grasped him by a hand, and started toward the house.

She saw Aunt Betsey watching her from the front doorway, with Uncle Ephraim behind her, looking over her shoulder. And upon Aunt Betsey's face was a welcoming smile. Uncle Ephraim, too, was smiling. And Bud smiled also, and snuggled close to the lady, for he liked her very much.

And still another person in the vicinity was smiling. He had seen Miss Seddon riding over the plains toward the ranchhouse, and, having noted Bud's position on the post, he had discreetly retired to a point within the stable —not more than twenty feet distant from the corral gate— where, with a gleeful eye at a convenient knothole, and nothing but a thin, board wall intervening, he had heard every word spoken by Bud and the radiant lady visitor.

No emotion of shame seemed to afflict the culprit; there was no gleam of guilt in his eyes. And when, after a while —after Miss Seddon had been received and made to feel welcome by Aunt Betsey and Uncle Ephraim, and both

moment came — and he knew that Kinney, after the first glance, also realized it. It had been when the sarcastic smile had begun to appear on Rand's face that the mental picture of his mother flashed before him. And the sarcasm he felt had been directed at himself — it was the savage cynicism of his father sneering at the maternal influences that had conquered him. So, fighting — and losing — the bitter battle, he had merely wounded Kinney.

It had been the same way when he had gone into the Gilt Edge. Thoughts of his mother had influenced him while he had been talking with Webster; but as soon as he stepped into the street a new savage impulse had seized him, and he had determined to kill Compton when he had entered the saloon.

But there, again, had his mother's face appeared before him — he had been looking at her when he had stuck the muzzle of his gun into Compton's side.

He had known, then, that he dared not yield to the violent impulses that had driven him to town — for had he done so the reproach in his mother's eyes would have haunted him all the days of his life. Nor, never again would he have been able to look at the picture of her — the picture that adorned the wall of his room at the Three Bar.

Therefore the mingled emotions of victory and defeat assailed him as he stood on the brow of the hill overlook-

ing the big basin; but they were emotions out of which he could gain no consolation. For when he had faced Compton in the saloon — after he had decided not to use the gun that was making a dent in the man's side — after he had conquered the yearning to kill — he had not dared to knock Compton down, for fear the blow would arouse the blood-lust again and he would yield to it.

He had done then what he thought was the wise thing — he had grimly closed his ears to Compton's insults; he had fled from the temptation to slay.

But now the shame of his decision was upon him; and the bitter curses that issued from between his clenched teeth, the flaming scorn and contempt of self that gleamed in his eyes, told how bitterly he regretted the weakness that had come over him in town.

He climbed into the saddle presently, pale, his jaws set, and his eyes glowing with a brooding, sullen light; sending Midnight slowly down the slope.

And when he reached the floor of the basin he saw that Larry Redfern had not moved very far from where he had stood when Rand had last seen him — he was leaning against the outfit wagon, his back to Rand, apparently not having seen or heard Rand coming toward him.

He turned, though — swiftly — as Rand rode close to him; his right hand dropping to the holster at his hip. On Redfern's face, too, there was a sullen expression — a

savage truculence which told of the bitterness of his thoughts.

And his first words revealed what those thoughts had been; for when he flashed around and saw Rand, his face lighted, and he fairly yelled at Rand:

"You old son-of-a-gun! You got him!"

In an instant he was at Rand's side, gripping one of his hands, trying to pull Rand off his horse. And when Rand resisted, pulling back, his face flaming with the shame of the thing that had happened to him, Redfern squeezed the captured hand hard and looked gleefully up into Rand's face.

"You old son-of-a-gun! I never thought you could do it! Tell me about it, you close-mouthed Apache! Tell me how you done it? Don't set there blushin' like a house afire, keepin' me in suspense! Spit it out!"

"Kinney ain't dead," said Rand. "I busted his hand —that's all. I couldn't kill him—he looked too—too easy, I reckon."

"Easy! Oh—why, hell's fire! Easy? Kinney easy?" Redfern's voice grew low and awed; he pushed his hat back and brushed his forehead with a hand, amazed, stunned. "You busted Kinney's hand—an' you say he's easy! Good Lord! I knowed you was slick—but—Kinney!"

Rand grinned without mirth. "I was goin' to kill him,"

he confessed; "but when I'd knocked his gun out of his hand — snappin' a shot at it when he tried to draw, when my back was turned — an' he stood there, goin' for his other gun, an' lookin' so white an' scared — I didn't have the nerve to kill him. An' later, when I got Compton in the Gilt Edge, I didn't have the nerve to kill him, either. He wouldn't draw his gun. I've sure made a mess of this deal," he concluded bitterly.

"Holy smoke!" breathed Redfern; "no nerve! He goes to town, deliberate — not lettin' me go with him — to meet Slim Kinney — with Kinney waitin' to kill him. He knocks Kinney's gun to smithereens, an' busts Kinney's hand — makin' a tenderfoot sucker out of the slickest gunfighter in the country. Then he busts into the Gilt Edge — with everything ag'in him, an' scares Link Compton so that he don't know he's got a gun! An' then he comes back here an' yaps disappointed like, because he ain't got no nerve. Hell's fire — what does he call nerve — that's what I'd like to know?"

Redfern asked his questions of the yawning distance, as though that distance were a third person.

But his enthusiasm was answered by a saturnine smile from Rand. He said lowly: "I had to tell you;" wheeled his horse and rode away, toward the Three Bar, leaving Redfern to look after him in puzzled astonishment.

CHAPTER XV

SWEARING TO A LIE

RAND'S temperament was not volatile; there was no infirmity of purpose in his moods; and of the two influences which shaped his conduct toward his fellowmen, that exerted by his mother's memory was the stronger. She had trained him, had warned him; and he was dominated by the gentle impulses she had bequeathed him. It was only when he was goaded and provoked by antagonistic forces that the turbulent, maddening passions seized him; and even then he fought grimly to conquer.

Men had seen those passions slumbering in him. Larry Redfern knew of their existence — for in those moments when he and Rand were together, with the gentleness of a trusting friendship between them, Redfern had seen the hard glint far back in the man's eyes.

But Larry Redfern knew — as Uncle Ephraim and Aunt Betsy knew — that Rand normally was ruled by the better impulses of his nature; they knew, too, that he fought continually to overcome the vicious moods that seized him. Uncle Ephraim and Aunt Betsey, aware of the legacy of savagery, pitied him; but Redfern, knowing that in all men reigned much that was elemental — a

vicious strain that at times sent their thoughts back to the abysmal period—smiled wisely at Rand's moods.

He was convinced that the impulses of the primal man were somewhat stronger in Rand than in many other men—that was all. Aroused, Rand was cynical, malignant, dangerous; but that mood conquered, he was gravely gentle, soft-spoken, with a slow humor that had endeared him to his relatives and to his men.

Rand spent two or three days overcoming the venomous thoughts that racked his soul. During this time he was absent a great deal from the ranchhouse, spending much of his time with the outfit on the open range.

Several times, brooding over what had happened to him in Ocate, he was on the point of yielding to impulses to return and complete the work he had begun, but each time a recollection of Redfern's words dissuaded him. If Redfern could see nothing shameful in his conduct it must be that his own mental vision was at fault. For Larry had the disturbing habit of speaking plainly, without prejudice.

At any rate, Rand's mood slowly changed. His face, set in grim lines, began to relax; the cold, hard gleam in his eyes began to soften. And one day, on his way to the ranchhouse, he grinned widely at the space and the silence.

He had reflected much over Kinney—he kept seeing the man's face as it had been in the moments preceding the

shooting. Blank stupefaction had been in the man's eyes.

"I reckon he was plumb scared!" Rand told himself as he rode homeward. "If I had showed that kind of 'yellow'—now!"

Then he laughed, audibly. For his thoughts went to Compton. For, despite Compton's manner, there had been something akin to fear in *his* eyes, too, when they had met Rand's, in the saloon.

Rand was convinced that one day he and Compton must settle their differences—that was inevitable. For their hatred of each other was like some strong poison. And one day, when the feeling between them grew intolerable, they would clash.

But Rand's thoughts this afternoon did not long remain on Compton and Kinney. He kept thinking of Eleanor Seddon, and the blazing flame in her eyes when he had shot Seddon's pipe out of his hand.

He wondered much over the incident, and over what had happened after he had ridden away.

He knew Seddon—Seddon had no moral courage. Would Seddon betray him? He thought not. For Seddon would not want the girl to know about Bud. To be sure, *he* would not tell Eleanor about the boy, even if Seddon were to poison the girl's mind against him—for he would not want the girl to suffer the humiliation the knowledge would bring upon her.

But Seddon would *think* he would tell, and that fear would compel Seddon to silence regarding the hostility between them. Seddon would make some plausible explanation for the shooting of the pipe—that was certain.

And if Seddon *did* explain, what would follow? Why, Eleanor Seddon, her doubts removed, would keep her promise to ride over to the Three Bar for the purpose of reforming Bud! For Rand had seen that implacable purpose in her eyes!

And Bud! Rand grinned widely as he neared the house.

Unsaddling Midnight, and turning the animal into the corral, he entered the house.

Uncle Ephraim was seated on the back steps, smoking, and talking confidentially to Bud. Aunt Betsy was seated at the kitchen table, peeling potatoes.

She heard Rand come in the side door, and she looked furtively at him over the tops of her spectacles as he halted in the doorway that led from the kitchen to the dining-room. There was a grin on Rand's face, and by that token Aunt Betsey knew he had conquered the dark passions that for days had beset him. For she had heard from Larry Redfern the story of what had happened at Ocate.

Rand had not mentioned the incident, and had it not been for Larry, Aunt Betsey would not have known there had been trouble, for though, when Rand had been in

the house, he had been silent and thoughtful, there had been no change in his manner toward Aunt Betsey, Uncle Ephraim, or Bud. But that grin told Aunt Betsey many things, and she answered it with a smile in which there was a devout thankfulness.

And she thrilled with emotion when Rand walked to her, placed a sinewy arm around her shoulders and hugged her silently.

"You're a regular bear, Beaudry!" she exclaimed when he released her. She raised her head and looked up at him, her eyes shining. "I'm awfully glad you didn't," she said.

"Didn't what?" He glanced quickly at her.

"Glad you didn't kill that Ocate gunfighter. Don't you ever, Beaudry! Whatever happens, don't do that! I've heard your father say, many times, that once you start—once you kill a man in passion—you can't stop killing. It's like an appetite for strong drink; it takes hold of you, your father said, and makes you drunk. And there are always men who will dare you and defy you and taunt and mock you—to make you kill. There'll be gunmen who will be jealous of you; who will——"

"Who's been talkin'?" inquired Rand. He seized her face in both his hands. "Larry?" he questioned.

She nodded. "He was *so* tickled!" she declared. "He said he just couldn't help telling me!"

Rand grinned. "I'll be tellin' Larry somethin'," he threatened.

"Shucks, you won't!" she laughed.

Rand left her and strode to the door. "You had any visitors besides Larry?" he called back to Aunt Betsey over his shoulder.

"Nobody but Larry and one of the men."

Rand bent down and seized Bud about the middle, swinging him upward to his shoulder, the boy grinning hugely from his elevation.

"We're goin' to look at the horses, Bud," said Rand as he strode out of the house.

They did look at the horses. Rand perched Bud on the top rail of the corral fence and, with the sinking sun behind them, they watched the several animals within the enclosure, as, with the knowledge that they were observed, they whipped the deep dust of the place until it rose in clouds.

Bud had had curls; the evidence of them still existed on the top of his head. The top of his head, however, was the only place where their presence might have been detected, for elsewhere his hair was cut short, "like a man's," at his own request.

Manliness was in Bud's manner as he sat on the fence watching, with a critical eye, the movements of the horses. His little lips were tight-set, his eyes gleaming.

"Some day I'm goin' to ride that there mustard horse!" he told Rand.

"You sure are — some day!" assured the latter. "An' that day ain't goin' to be long in comin'. For," he added, with a shrewd look at Bud, his eyes gleaming with a guilty, shameful expression for the thing he was about to do, "you're pretty much of a man right now, ain't you?"

The boy nodded, and Rand continued slowly:

"You like that mustard horse, eh?" he said. "You ain't got any use for that damned monkey-faced sorrel?"

The boy shot a quick glance at Rand's face; it was expressionless. It was also very red, but Bud did not see that, for he was looking at Rand's face for signs. There were no signs. But Bud thought Rand was breathing heavily.

Bud looked at the sorrel horse and then again at Rand's face. It was the first time he had ever heard a profane word. For Rand's command regarding the use of profanity within hearing distance of the boy had been vigorous, and the outfit had religiously obeyed him. Of course, Uncle Ephraim and Aunt Betsey did not swear.

Bud wondered if he had quite understood Rand. He looked intently at Rand, and Rand saw the question in his eyes.

"You ain't got any use for that damned monkey-faced sorrel, eh?" repeated Rand.

"I wouldn't ride any damned monkey-faced sorrel!" declared the boy.

Rand buried his face in his arms, and Bud did not see the unholy mirth that suffused it. Nor did Bud see any of the expressions that wreathed Rand's face, as with diabolical craft and suggestion he continued to teach the youngster proficiency in the art of profane expression.

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CHAPTER XVI

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Bud said more. For a child, unused to a new language, he did well. With a fluency born of a keen liking for the picturesque method of expression, he nobly set to work to defame the sorrel. So complete was his work that it caused the lady behind him to grow speechless with amazement.

She got down silently, her face crimson, and stealthily approached the criminal. And the first Bud knew of her presence was when he felt a soft hand on his shoulder, and a softer voice whispering into his ear:

"Little boy — Bud; you mustn't say those naughty things!"

Bud twisted on the post top and surveyed the lady wonderingly. He never had seen a girl quite like the one who was close to him now; never had he thought there was so much beauty and winsomeness in *any* girl. And so Bud's thoughts grew shamefully confused. He wanted to be a man, like his father, and those swear words sounded big and important to the ear; they had a snap and a resonance all their own. But somehow, there was that in the lady's reproaching and rebuking eyes which convinced him, almost, that the words should not be used.

But Bud was loyal to his father, and he bravely straightened.

"Why?" he protested.

"God doesn't like little boys who swear," the lady informed him gently.

"I don't like that damned monkey-faced sorrel!" declared Bud, unimpressed.

The lady tried a new trick; she was cunningly resourceful.

"Bud," she said, smiling sweetly at him, "I'm afraid I won't like you if you say that again."

Bud smirked uncertainly. He wanted the lady to like him, and yet he wanted to be a man. Still, there was a coldness in the expression of the lady's face which warned him that if he persisted he would lose her; and so the smirk became a broad, winning smile.

"I won't say it again," he conceded.

Instantly the lady smiled with him, and he impulsively hugged her as she lifted him down from the post.

He watched her as she threw the reins over Silver's head, looping them around the post upon which he had been sitting; then she grasped him by a hand, and started toward the house.

She saw Aunt Betsey watching her from the front doorway, with Uncle Ephraim behind her, looking over her shoulder. And upon Aunt Betsey's face was a welcoming smile. Uncle Ephraim, too, was smiling. And Bud smiled also, and snuggled close to the lady, for he liked her very much.

And still another person in the vicinity was smiling. He had seen Miss Seddon riding over the plains toward the ranchhouse, and, having noted Bud's position on the post, he had discreetly retired to a point within the stable —not more than twenty feet distant from the corral gate—where, with a gleeful eye at a convenient knothole, and nothing but a thin, board wall intervening, he had heard every word spoken by Bud and the radiant lady visitor.

No emotion of shame seemed to afflict the culprit; there was no gleam of guilt in his eyes. And when, after a while —after Miss Seddon had been received and made to feel welcome by Aunt Betsey and Uncle Ephraim, and both

had withdrawn, leaving Miss Seddon alone on the porch with Bud—the culprit shamelessly emerged from the stable and made his way to the porch.

Miss Seddon had not seen him emerge from the stable; she was not aware of his presence until she saw Bud—who was sitting on her lap—grin widely. Then she turned, and her face became radiant again.

"Oh," she said; "it is you?"

"I reckon it's me, ma'am," he grinned. "Looks like you ain't figurin' to lose any time workin' on Bud."

"Poor little fellow," she said, smoothing Bud's short hair. "He needs someone to care for him. It seems Aunt Betsey has never heard him—er—use profanity. Besides, she has plenty to do to take care of the house. When I got here some time ago, Bud was sitting on the gatepost there, swearing horribly."

"He's a wolf at it, ma'am," stated Rand gravely; "he's a dyed-in-the-wool pirate for cussin'. Why, ma'am, I've heard him slingin' words around that would scare a steer off the range."

"How awful!" exclaimed Miss Seddon. "And he is such a nice little fellow, too!"

"As to his cussin'," resumed Rand, his gaze unwavering as it met the lady's; "there's a heap to do in the reformin' line. Teachin' is what he wants, ma'am—plenty of teachin'."

"I'll do what I can, of course," stated the lady. "But you might help, too. Why, he swears horribly!"

"I was helpin' him only last night," assured Rand, without winking an eyelash. "What he needs is someone like you, ma'am, to wean him from them terrible habits of cussin'."

However, Bud received little instruction that day. Indeed, it seemed to Bud that he was being sadly neglected. For though he felt the lady's hand gripping his, and at times felt her fingers running lingeringly through his hair, he became aware that her attention was centered chiefly upon his father.

He watched closely, unnoticed by both, and saw the lady's eyes glow in those moments when Rand was not looking at her, when he seemed, his face slightly flushed, to be gravely thinking. But always, Bud noticed, she drooped her eyes when Rand turned to look at *her*. And at such times Rand's eyes did the glowing.

It was puzzling to Bud; he would have wished their eyes to glow when both were looking.

Later, Bud was lifted from his comfortable position on the lady's lap and placed upon the top step of the porch. He heard them speak of "riding," and, receiving a final tender patting on the crown of his head, he was left disconsolate and brooding on the porch, to watch Silver and Midnight lope away toward the timber, their riders laugh-

ing and talking, seemingly having forgotten that such a thing as profanity had ever been mentioned.

Bud watched them until they vanished behind a ridge in the distance; then he got down from the porch, walked to the corral gate, climbed the post, and began, with grave deliberation, to voice his opinion of the sorrel horse.

CHAPTER XVII

A FRESH DEAL

FOR a time, following the departure of Rand, Link Compton stood in the rear room of the Gilt Edge talking with his friends. There was a smile on Compton's face as he talked, and his eyes were glinting with a bland good humor; for he had publicly defied Rand, and he was filled with a grim amusement over the occurrence. The big man could be engaging when he desired, and now his friends grinned sympathetically with him, remembering his icy composure when facing the passion in Rand's eyes.

Compton did not speak of Rand. When an admirer mentioned the occurrence, Compton smilingly rebuked him.

But after Kinney's hand had been attended to, and the gunfighter and Compton were in the street, walking toward the sheriff's office, Compton looked at the other, a gleam of venomous disgust in his eyes.

"You're a hell of a gunslinger!" he charged. "Lost your nerve, eh? You stood there shivering like a coyote in a blizzard, and let him bust you wide open! You didn't even get started!"

The reason Kinney hadn't got "started" was a mystery

to the gunfighter himself. Even now, having had some time to meditate upon the miracle, he was mystified. He brushed his good hand uncertainly over his eyes, as though to dispel the blank amazement that still afflicted him.

"That ain't never happened to me before," he muttered. "He had me clean flustered. I didn't seem to know I had any guns on me; an' when I did get goin', it was too late."

Compton laughed grimly, contempt of Kinney blazing in his eyes.

"Well," he said, "we lost that trick. There's no use whining over it."

They found Webster in his office, and they went in, Kinney dropping himself disconsolately in a chair, Compton standing, huge and furious, beside Webster's desk.

"Webster," he said coldly, meeting the other's gaze, "somebody peached. Who was it?"

Webster spread both hands upon the desk, the palms upward, in eloquent denial of all responsibility.

"How in hell should I know?" he growled. "The first I knowed everything was goin' to smithereens was when I seen Kinney standin' there like a snubbin' post, his eyes poppin' out of his head — scared plumb stiff. An' Rand, grinnin' like a tiger, throwin' a scrap of paper at his number 'leven's!"

Compton looked at Kinney. "What was written on that paper?"

"It was a bill of sale for that Midnight horse — from Seddon," growled Kinney.

Compton's face paled with rage. He strode out of the office and mounted his horse. Riding southward many miles, he encountered the Bar S outfit.

Seddon was not with the outfit.

Compton waited, expecting him. But Seddon did not come that day; and Compton, reluctant to visit the Bar S ranchhouse for fear Eleanor Seddon might overhear some of the vitriolic things he intended to say to her father, stayed with the outfit.

It was not until sunrise the next day that Seddon appeared. And then, drawing the Bar S owner aside, Compton learned the story of Rand's appearance at the Bar S to demand the bill of sale. But the information came after Compton had charged Seddon with disloyalty to him.

With rage still gripping him, Compton abruptly left Seddon and rode back to town.

He spent the greater part of the day in the saddle, riding to the Two Link from the Bar S camp, and talking long and earnestly with his range boss. Then, late in the afternoon, he was standing near the front door of the Gilt Edge talking with Labrue, the proprietor, a suave, smooth-spoken, dark-faced man, with sleek, black hair and steady, cruel eyes.

He laughed harshly while Compton was talking with him.

"So, she did that, eh? Queered the whole deal. I was wondering if it wasn't something like that. What? Sure! I don't give a damn what you do to her!"

Smiling mirthlessly, Compton walked through the barroom, strode across the dance-hall, and climbed the stairs to the second story. There were a number of doors off a hall, but Compton did not hesitate, pausing before one and knocking softly upon it.

When the door swung open an instant later—just a trifle, to permit a woman's face to peer outward inquiringly—Compton placed a shoulder against it, and forced his way into the room, closing the door behind him, barring it, and grinning sneeringly at Lucia Morell who, arrayed in a loose gown, her hair disheveled, her eyes gleaming with fury over the ruthlessness of Compton's entrance, stood back at a little distance from the door, glaring at him.

"Clever—eh, Lucia?" said Compton, his lips smiling, though his eyes were gleaming with a ferocity that was unmistakable. "Ha, ha! You almost got away with it, too! How did you get word to him?"

The girl stiffened; her chin went up defiantly. Then she laughed tantalizingly, for she saw in Compton's eyes the suspicion that lay naked in them.

"So you know, eh?" she laughed, her white teeth flashing. "Well, if you know, why should you come to me? Get out of here—I hate you!"

"Sore, eh?" grinned Compton. He was flattered by this exhibition of temper; it showed that she had cared more for him than he had thought. "Well," he went on, "a man gets tired—just as I tired of you. So you told him, eh?"

It was plain to the girl that Compton meditated violence; she saw that in his eyes now, where, an instant before, she had seen only rage. Her face whitened a little as she stepped toward the dresser, where she kept a pistol of small caliber.

Compton saw the gleam of fear in her eyes and the swift pallor that came into her cheeks. And before she could reach the dresser he leaped at her, gripping her hands with a ruthless strength that made her whimper with pain.

He held her close to him, holding both her hands in one of his, while with the free hand he seized the back of her neck, the fingers biting deeply into the flesh. She cringed from the malignant fury of his eyes and opened her lips to scream.

"Scream, damn you!" he sneered. "You tell me how you warned Rand or I'll choke the life out of you!"

Awed by the blazing eyes of the man, unable to endure

the terrible pain at the back of her neck, the girl answered frenziedly:

"I rode to him that night — the night I heard you and Kinney and Webster plotting to kill him. I was behind the partition. Don't squeeze so hard, Link; you are hurting me!"

But the man's eyes were still aflame with fury, and his fingers sank deeper into her flesh. And he laughed, lowly and harshly.

"Was it because you hate me, or because you love him? Answer straight, or I'll break your neck!"

"I love him," answered the woman.

Compton laughed full-throatedly, a bitter, mirthless laugh that made the woman shiver.

"You love him, eh!" He looked at her as though about to taunt her regarding the passion to which she had confessed; then his grip tightened and his eyes grew subtle and cunning.

"Two or three times while we were on good terms, you hinted that you knew the father of that kid of Rand's. I'm wanting to know — I'm going to know, right now!"

He released her hands and slipped both his own to her throat, and despite the wild appeal in her eyes, and the staring horror in them, he pressed his thumbs into the flesh until she cried out chokingly:

"Don't; I'll tell!"

"Is it Rand?" he whispered hoarsely.

She shook her head negatively.

"Who, then?"

"Amos Seddon," she whispered gaspingly. Then she reeled backward and staggered to a chair, into which she fell, both hands at her throat; while Compton, with wide, incredulous gaze, watched her.

"You lying?" he said, stepping toward her and standing over her threateningly.

Again she made a negative motion with her head, and Compton backed away, laughing derisively.

"The old son-of-a-gun!" he said. He again approached the girl, grinning down at her hugely.

"So that's the reason Seddon doesn't like Rand, eh? Rand knows, does he?" he asked the girl.

The girl nodded affirmatively.

For a time Compton stood and watched her, a gleam of malicious cunning in his smiling eyes.

Yesterday, in the rear room downstairs, when Rand had entered while Kinney's injured hand was being cared for, Compton had caught the glances exchanged by Rand and Lucia Morell. And during the time that Rand had been in the room, Compton had observed the admiration and applause in the girl's eyes.

But it had not been until he had been riding toward town earlier in the day that he had thought to associate

the girl with the incident of the shooting. And then, remembering her glance at Rand, he had decided it had been she who had warned Rand.

He had entered her room, determined to inflict physical punishment upon her; but the revelation of Seddon's secret, and the discovery that the girl was in love with Rand, offered possibilities that would be more satisfying than physical punishment inflicted upon the girl who cringed in the chair near him.

He laughed, lowly and placatively, as he watched Lucia; and when he walked toward her and stood looking down at her, the passion had gone out of his eyes.

"I didn't intend to hurt you, Lucia." He drew a chair near her and seated himself on its edge. "You see, I lost my temper. I didn't know you loved Rand; I thought you had warned him because you hated me."

Disregarding the resentful fury of the girl's eyes, he resumed, smiling smoothly.

"I know you'd like to murder me, but I won't let you. Let's talk sense and face the facts. You love Rand, and with a woman of your type, to love a man is to try to get him. Has it ever occurred to you that Rand is a handsome devil, and that there might be another woman, besides yourself, who wants him?"

He regarded her keenly, and his lips curved with a smile of satisfaction when he saw her start and stiffen.

He knew the woman's nature; he was aware of the passionate impulses that ruled her; and he saw the wanton gleam in her eyes as she returned his gaze.

She was thinking of Rand; of his manner on the night she had warned him of the plot to kill him; of how he had held her off, refusing her advances. She had thought, then, that there might be another woman, but she could think of no one in Ocate who might be a possible rival. For Rand, until now, had not been interested in women—of her type, at least.

And so, despite her resentment for the big, smiling, ruthless man, she could not hide her curiosity and interest.

"Who is she?" she demanded, her dark eyes glowing with sudden passion.

"That's better," mocked Compton. "The thought that there might be another woman is intolerable, isn't it?"

"Bah!" she scoffed; "don't try to be humorous, Link; it doesn't become you. Especially at this minute, when you've choked me, and you are insanely jealous of Rand. Ha, ha!" she laughed when she saw Compton's face turn crimson and noted the leaping fire in his eyes. "The thought that there might be another *man* is intolerable, too, eh?"

He cursed, and sat looking at her vindictively; and the woman, watching him with implacable, hating gaze, smiled sneeringly, wisdom in her eyes.

"Everybody knows you hate Rand, and everybody knows Rand hates you. That's notorious. And everybody knows that if both of you stay in this country long enough, your hatred for each other will end in a killing. It would have ended that way before now, if Rand was as bloodthirsty as you. And it's coming now; any fool can see that. And *you* are hurrying it. And I know why. It's because you and Rand love the same woman. Who is she, Link?" she taunted, watching him with level gaze.

"It's Eleanor Seddon!" snapped Compton, his eyes gleaming balefully as they met those of the woman.

Lucia drew a long breath and leaned back in the chair. For a long time she sat motionless and thoughtful, her eyes smoldering with a fire that fascinated Compton, so deep and wanton was it. And at last, with a shallow grin at him, she said lowly:

"It looks as though our interests are going to jibe, after all, doesn't it, Link?"

And then, for half an hour, they talked. The woman was no longer resentful, and Compton taunted her no more. And when Compton departed he was wearing an evil, satisfied grin; while the woman, left alone, sat for some time in the chair, smiling mirthlessly.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RIDDLE OF RAND

MIDNIGHT and Silver had no hard task upon the day Bud sat on the porch watching them as they loped toward the river, beyond which was the big stretch of timber, for their riders seemed to be in no hurry. Therefore the two horses, nosing each other companionably, made their way leisurely into the smiling sunshine, contented with the small demands made upon them.

At the shallow crossing of the river, Miss Seddon pulled Silver up and looked at Rand with a slightly troubled expression in her eyes.

"Water is getting scarce in this section, isn't it?" she inquired. The girl had in mind her father's charge that Rand was "stingy" with the water, and she wanted to see Rand's face when she spoke of it. And so she turned to look at him.

He met her gaze steadily. "Why, I reckon there's enough water. Only," he added, smiling faintly, "it ain't scattered around as it might be. Your dad didn't have much last season. His stock was lookin' pretty bad, an Larry Redfern rode over an' told him to drive to the shallow here to water."

"Who is Larry Redfern?"

"My range boss."

Her eyes quickened as she looked at him. "Larry Redfern rode over, you said. But of course Redfern had to have some authority to make the offer; he could not have made it on his own responsibility!"

"I expect he had authority," said Rand, looking downward and smoothing Midnight's mane.

"Whose?" she demanded.

"Why, mine, ma'am," he grinned; "was you expectin' Larry has more than one boss?"

"Why didn't you say it was you at the start?" she demanded.

He looked up and his eyes, gleaming serenely, met hers.

"I'd heard that Compton an' your dad was complainin' that I was stingy with the water. Larry an' me was talkin' it over one day, an' Larry suggested we ought to let your dad's cattle water here. An' so Larry rode over an' told your dad."

"And Compton?"

"Compton didn't get any invitation."

"Why?"

She saw his eyes gleam with some strong passion. But only for an instant. In the next he was smilng mirthlessly at Midnight's mane, where he patted it.

She felt the constraint that had come into his manner;

and she divined that all was not well between him and Compton. Seddon had not told her that Compton was implicated in the shooting in town, and so she had no foundation upon which to build a structure of speculation; though a certain hard expression that had come into Rand's face indicated much.

But if she expected him to explain his attitude toward Compton she was doomed to disappointment, for while she waited, expectantly, he looked up, grinning gravely.

"Why, I reckon we must have plumb forgot him!"

She remembered that on the day of her meeting with Compton — just after she had fled from the Three Bar on the day Rand had shown her a picture of his father — she had spoken to Compton of Rand, and she had a vivid recollection of Compton's manner at the time — and of his words: "I am glad that your adventure didn't turn out to be any worse than it did."

That speech indicated bitterness toward Rand; and the passion he had betrayed when she had mentioned having been in the timber with Rand, coupled with Rand's manner at this moment, convinced her that between the two men was a mutual dislike at the least.

However, looking sharply at Rand, she decided that of the two he was the stronger character. For had she not been watching him closely a moment ago she would not have detected the passion in his eyes; he had sternly

repressed it, and he had not been eager to defame Compton — whereas Compton, in her talk with him, had permitted her to see his hatred of the other — it had suffused his face; his eyes had been malignant with it.

As a matter of fact, Compton's manner that day had prejudiced her against him. She had felt the magnetism of him; she had sensed his intense virility; and she had been aware that his face was darkly handsome.

If she had merely to deal with exteriors she might have been more deeply impressed. But back of the girl's clear eyes was an active brain possessed of a judgment of human values that might have disconcerted Compton, had he known of it.

For she had seen beyond Compton's surface attractions. She had seen the ruthlessness in his eyes; she had noted the flaming desire in them. She had seen the egotism and the complacent and smug self-satisfaction of him. And she had known — at the first look at him — that he expected to achieve an easy victory over her — that he had been easily victorious over many women.

However, she had *felt* the lure of him — that was sex, which no brain controls; and the danger that lay in her meeting him often was in the chance that sex, thrilled by his magnetism, would not be governed by the cold calm of reason. Therefore she feared him.

She did not fear Rand. Not even when he had shown

her the picture of his father had she feared him; she had been merely startled over the thought that unknowingly she had gone into the house with a man whom her father had condemned.

Rand's personality, too, had attracted her. And she saw beneath *his* surface attractions also. Rand was good-looking — better looking than Compton, in her estimation, for his features were stronger. Besides, when she looked beyond them at the inner man she felt the sturdy manliness of him, the ruggedness of his morals, the quiet force that radiated from him.

Upon only one point was she uncertain. That was concerning his moods. It was a thing that had baffled her that morning when he had been talking with her outside the ranchhouse just before he had shot her father's pipe out of his hand. She was baffled now, as they urged their horses on toward the timber.

The knowledge irritated her — in much the same manner that he had irritated her on the day of their first meeting — when she had mistaken him for one of the Bar S men. Never had she met a more contradictory character, nor one that interested her more than Rand interested her.

And yet he puzzled her. In his present mood he was gentle, grave and winning; and the slow humor in his eyes aroused her to a responsive emotion. At the same

time, it provoked her to a smoldering indignation — for it seemed to suggest the presence of a subtleness in him belied by the sternness of his face.

Contrasting his present mood with that other — the one she had seen him in when he had faced her father after the pipe-shooting incident — she discovered that there seemed to be no mental balance in which to weigh him. In that other mood his eyes, his face, his manner had reflected a hard, unyielding spirit — something savage and sinister and intolerant, a passionate intensity, an elemental brutality that had frightened her.

And she vacillated between two opinions; a grave question perplexed her; was he ruled by those dark passions she had seen slumbering in his eyes upon the day of the pipe-shooting incident, or did the lighter and gentler mood shape his attitude toward his fellows?

Men, of course, were always at their best when in the presence of women who interested them; she knew that. But he had shown her two moods, and it remained for her to judge him. And she could not judge.

Nor could she reach a conclusion after having explored the timber with him. For during the ride his mood did not change; he was gravely polite, considerate, and gentlemanly.

However, she was strangely attracted to him, and she found herself hoping that the gentleness she had seen in

him would prove to be the rule by which she must judge the man.

She came to see Bud the next day, and the next; and for many days following she managed to spend some time at the Three Bar.

Not always was Rand there to greet her. And during his absences she talked much with Aunt Betsey and Uncle Ephraim, to discover that the affection of the two for Rand was equaled only by the enthusiastic devotion of Bud.

Also, Aunt Betsey took her through the house, even into Rand's room, where the girl saw the picture of his mother on the wall. Eleanor stood long before the picture, studying the serenely smiling eyes that regarded her so steadily — eloquent, honest eyes that reflected the good that must have dwelt in the heart of their owner all the days of her life.

Also, looking keenly at the picture, Eleanor saw far back in the eyes a certain wistfulness and sadness; and she wondered if, when the picture was taken, the woman might not have been thinking of the man whose photograph hung on the wall in another room — Rand's father; the outlaw whose cruel, brooding face revealed evidence of those savage passions she had seen reflected in the eyes of the son.

CHAPTER XIX

COMPTON PLOTS

TWICE during the week that followed the talk between Link Compton and Lucia Morell in the girl's room above the Gilt Edge saloon, Compton rode over to the Bar S. Each time he found Eleanor Seddon absent from the ranchhouse, and each time Compton's face darkened with passion.

From the Mexican woman who had been Seddon's housekeeper since the death of Seddon's wife Compton learned that Eleanor was seldom at the ranchhouse during the day.

Nor did Compton gain any consolation from the Mexican woman's manner. She disliked the big man — for Compton's attitude toward her had always been that of contemptuous insolence — and she looked at him maliciously as, on his second visit within a few days, he stood at the edge of the porch, frowning, having just been told by the woman that Eleanor had gone away.

"Where did she go?" he demanded, scowling at the woman.

The woman smiled silkily, her voice soft-toned and apologetic. "She's ride theeze way — on the Silver

horse." She pointed toward the trail that led to the Three Bar, and Compton's gaze grew malignant.

"Does she go that way every day?"

"Ever' day," smiled the woman, veiling her dislike of the man with her smooth smile.

"How long does she stay?"

"How long?" The woman smiled broadly and knowingly, and held up a hand, the fingers spread wide. "She's stay theeze many hours — always. More — sometimes. Most always she come home with the dark." Her smile broadened as she launched a subtle shaft at Compton. "Rand is a nize man — you think?"

Compton sneered silently at her, leaped on his horse, and rode away, riding rigid in the saddle — betraying his rage; while the woman, watching him, grimaced at his back.

Compton had not been surprised to discover that Eleanor Seddon was visiting the Three Bar. In fact, he had expected the girl to be interested in Rand. For upon the day she had told him of her meeting with Rand in the timber, he had not failed to note the glow in her eyes when she had spoken of Rand; and though he knew that much of the girl's praise was sheer coquetry — with some perverseness, aroused by the jealousy *he* must have exhibited — he had been aware that she had felt a deep interest in the man.

For Rand was a man who attracted the interest of every woman who saw him. The man's strong face; the cold confidence that he exuded; the brooding, passionate gleam of his eyes—all those unusual and visible signs of character could not fail to intrigue a woman's curiosity.

They had even impressed Compton! For despite his hatred of the man, Compton recognized him as a worthy antagonist. And beneath Compton's hatred was a respect—vague and reluctant, but undoubtedly sincere.

With jealousy raging within him—his face hideous with the reflection of it—Compton followed the trail taken by Rand on the morning the latter had ridden to Ocate to meet Kinney.

Compton's reflections were as bitter as the expression on his face. For he felt that Rand was an interloper.

During the three years that he had owned the Two Link, Compton had listened to Seddon's praises of his daughter until he had felt that he knew the girl. And Seddon had given him the girl's photograph.

Compton had studied the picture until the desire to possess her had grown acute, a passion that had laid its gripping yearning upon his soul. And on the day, sitting in the chair on the porch of the Bar S ranchhouse, he had seen her riding toward him, he had felt that he had known her during the years of her absence from the Bar S.

But even before her home-coming he had been jealous

of Rand. He had been afraid of Rand, afraid that when Eleanor saw the Three Bar man there would be little chance for himself. That jealousy was what had made him hate Rand at first sight; it was his jealousy which had made him continue to hate the man; it was that passion which had made him so eager to bring about Rand's death through the instrumentality of Kinney, the gunfighter; the same passion had led him to spread the story which had linked Rand's name to the robberies and the cattle-rustling incidents which had occurred within the past two or three years.

And the thing he had feared had come to pass — Eleanor Seddon was interested in Rand. And Rand had succeeded in escaping the meshes of every plot that had been laid to trap him.

Compton rode through the immense basin in which Rand had come upon Larry Redfern. Compton knew the Three Bar outfit was in the basin with the Three Bar cattle, for he had seen men and cattle from the edge of the mesa from which Rand had viewed them on the morning he had gone to town to meet Kinney.

Compton, however, had no intention of conversing with the Three Bar men, for he hated them all with something of the same fervor with which he hated their employer. But when, traveling the trail that wound its way through the basin, he came upon Larry Redfern, riding toward

him, on his way to join some of the Three Bar men far out in the basin, he returned Larry's grinning nod with a curt wave of the hand.

He was about to ride on, and was passing within a dozen feet of Larry when, noting the scowl on Compton's face, and yielding to one of those jocose impulses which sometimes moved him, Larry spoke:

"I reckon the Bar S is gettin' a heap popular."

Compton halted his horse and wheeled it, facing Larry. The rage which had seethed in Compton's veins since leaving the Bar S was in his eyes as he looked at Larry; a pallid sneer was wreathing his face; his voice was dry and light and venomous.

"Just what are you getting at, Redfern?" he asked slowly.

There was a grin on Larry's face. At first it had been an amused grin, now it was mirthless. For he saw in Compton's eyes the terrible rage that had gripped the man; he saw that his joking words had aroused Compton to a bitter frenzy.

And yet in Larry's eyes was no fear. He ceased to grin, but in his eyes, as they met and held Compton's, was a glint of knowledge, an alertness, and a humorous malice.

"I'm meanin' there's a heap of suitors clutterin' up the Bar S trail. I'm thinkin' of gettin' into the game myself."

"Fresh, eh?" said Compton sneeringly. He pulled his

horse around so that his right side was hidden from Larry, so that the Three Bar man could not see his right hand, lingering close to the butt of his pistol.

But Larry did not need to see those things; he saw the light in Compton's eyes, and his own chilled, as with a lightning movement he drew his six-shooter and rested it on the pommel of his saddle, its muzzle frowning at Compton.

"Riled, eh?" mocked Larry; "meditatin' real venomous, you was, you locoed rummy! You're thinkin' I was born yesterday, eh — a flea-bitten pup!

"Your guessin' is plumb ridiculous! You don't reckon I'm goin' to let no sneakin' coyote like you shoot me? There's one thing I always do when I run across a poison sneak like you, an' that's to start gettin' ready a heap early!

"An' now I'm continuin' my remarks about the Bar S. I'm takin' back what I said about it bein' popular — for you. It ain't. Rand's got you coppered to lose. An' Miss Seddon ain't home to you." He grinned hugely. "She ain't home to nobody — looks like. For nearly every day I see her scuffin' up the top of that ridge above the river, hittin' the trail to the Three Bar. That's what's botherin' you, eh?" he added as Compton's lips went into a sullen pout.

"Well, you an' Rand fight it out; an' don't you go to

resentin' my sweet words on the subject, an' tryin' to sling your gun on me when I ain't expectin' it, or I'll sure bust you some! You mosey, now, before I get my temper mixed up with the trigger of this gun! Git, you coyote!"

Compton wheeled his horse and rode onward, not looking back.

When he reached the edge of the mesa he halted to breathe his horse, and saw, far back on the floor of the basin, Larry still sitting on his horse, watching.

Compton rode into Ocate, dismounting in front of the sheriff's office. Later, he talked with Webster, and still later he strode down the street to the Gilt Edge. The bitter mood still enduring, he drank much at the bar, and later played cards with some of his friends in the rear room. And about midnight he had another talk with Lucia Morell.

Early the next morning he rode northward, accompanied by Kinney, whose hand was healing rapidly.

The Two Link ranch was several miles northeastward from town; and the morning was still young when Compton and Kinney rode up to the gate of the horse corral and dismounted.

Several men who were draped on benches in front of the bunkhouse watched the approach of Compton and Kinney with interested glances. And as Compton dismounted and came toward them, Kinney closely follow-

ing, the men whispered to one another. One of them laughed lowly. All watched Kinney with an intentness which indicated much speculation.

There were six of the men — evil-eyed, reckless-looking fellows, bepistoled, spurred, and attired in rigging that was rather more picturesque than that affected by other range men of their kind — and when Kinney came close to them he felt that between them and himself was a kindred spirit. He grinned widely, and the smiles that answered his effort were as significant of knowledge as his own.

"This is Slim Kinney, boys," was Compton's presentation of his companion. "He's one of the gang, now." He grinned with cold mirth at the men. "I suppose 'Lefty' Morgan told you about that gun fracas Kinney had with Rand in town. Well," and he fixed them all with a sardonic glance, "don't go to razzing Kinney about him freezing like a statue and getting his finger busted. There ain't a damned one of you got nerve enough to run in with Rand. And so you don't need to josh Kinney about anything."

Noting that the men flushed at his reference to Rand, Compton laughed lowly. "It's hell when a man who has never plugged a man for keeps can bluff a whole damned outfit, ain't it?"

There was no answer, and Compton fixed his gaze upon

a tall man with a truculent eye, who sat a little apart from the others.

"Nothing new?" he inquired.

"Nope," said the other; "we was waitin' for you to show up." He grinned, one corner of his mouth drooping with extravagant nonchalance.

"We got a bunch of mavericks holed up in Red Rock basin. We ain't aimin' to run them north until you give the word."

"Whose stock?"

"Miller's, I reckon—mebbe some of Hiller's, from over the Divide."

"How many?"

"Hundred an' seventy-nine—strict count."

"Run them north tonight," directed Compton. "There won't be any moon. Take the east trail—that will take you past Hiller's far enough away so that his boys won't be able to see you if they're working the east basin."

"Correct," said the man. He rolled a cigarette, and while lighting it winked solemnly at the other men, Compton watching him. When he was sure Compton's gaze was upon him, and that Compton was expecting further speech from him, he said, slowly, as though speaking to the men at whom he was winking:

"Runnin' trail of nights is gittin' a heap monotonous. No excitement—no nothin'. If there was anybody

around here could tell a man about when the stage company is figurin' to drag a load of dust through — that man would sure be listened to a whole lot eager. You don't happen to know a guy like that — do you, you grinnin' coyotes!"

Compton laughed. "You're wanting to take things too easy, Carter. That last haul we made has got you greedy."

"There's a lot more of the boys wettin' their lips over the notion, too," grinned Carter.

"Well," said Compton; "we'll know it when they ship some more. Val Davis ain't letting anything get away from him." He walked to the door of the bunkhouse and peered inside. Then he again turned to Carter.

"Where's Lefty Morgan?"

"Morgan ain't showin' hisself much these days," answered Carter. "He's spendin' a heap of his time gallivantin' around the country on that big black hoss of his'n. I was down in the east cañon the other day, lookin' up strays. I rode roundabout, hittin' the big slope leadin' up to the level near the Three Bar ranchhouse; an' I seen a guy on a black hoss headin' toward me. I sure thought it was Beau Rand, an' I was gettin' ready to slope — when I took another peep an' seen it was Lefty Morgan on his black. That black sure looks enough like Rand's Midnight hoss to *be* him!"

Compton's eyes glowed; but he did not answer. Instead, wheeled, told Kinney he wanted to talk with him, and llowed by the gunfighter, he walked to the ranchhouse. Carter grinned at Kinney's back. "That guy, Rand, w," he said to the others; "he's sure got 'em all fussed ! There's guys which is yappin' that Rand ain't got rve enough to wipe a man out; but you notice none of e guys that's doin' the yappin' is runnin' in with Rand. iere's somethin' about Rand that makes me meek for ir when I meets up with him!"

"Link will bust him wide open, some of these days!" owled a man near Carter.

"Well," grinned Carter; "he won't be askin' Slim nney how to do it, I reckon!"

It was later the next afternoon when Lefty Morgan, e Two Link range boss, rode up to the ranchhouse and pped from his black horse. Compton met him on the rch.

"Well?" interrogated Compton.

Morgan, who was a short man with an energetic air d a squinting, quizzical eye, grinned faintly.

"He's sure a Simon-pure lover!" he said. "An' she es up plenty eager to have him. I watched them — as u told me; an I'm that used to crawlin' on my belly in brush that there's times when I'm certain I'm a locoed e-winder. Anyhow, they've got thick. At first she

held off quite considerable — him not makin' no progress But within the last day or so, she's give in. An' thi afternoon I seen them settin' close together on a log i the timber — Rand holdin' her hand an' speakin' gentl to her. What he was tellin' her must have tickled her heap, for she was blushin' prodigious, an' not sayin' any thing."

"That's all," said Compton, shortly.

CHAPTER XX

"LIARS — AND LIARS"

ELEANOR SEDDON had been making progress with Bud, and upon the day Morgan made his report to Compton, she had ridden to the Three Bar again.

Certain thoughts had troubled the lady today as she rode toward the Three Bar. Of late she had been aware of an eagerness that had seized her each morning when she had awakened in her room at the Bar S. That there was an attraction for her at the Three Bar, she knew, but until this morning she could not have told whether the attraction was Bud or the grave-faced man who had transferred the responsibility of Bud's training to her. But on this morning she had mercilessly applied the probe of self-analysis, and she had blushed many times during the ride.

For upon her — as a result of the analysis — had grown the conviction that Rand was the magnet that attracted her. To be sure, she loved Bud, and she had a sincere desire to direct his youthful thoughts into less profane channels; but she could no longer deny that upon those days when Rand absented himself — or when he was not at the Three Bar to greet her — she was afflicted with a

regret that almost took the pleasure out of her teaching of Bud.

She knew she had been reluctant to admit the existence of that regret; but upon this morning she found herself hoping Rand would be at the Three Bar when she arrived —and then quite suddenly she realized that the Three Bar lacked something when Rand was absent.

It was a disturbing conviction, and upon this morning —when she admitted its existence—she blushed furiously. But she rode on, her eyes brighter than usual, as, nearing the ranchhouse, she scanned the buildings and the surrounding country.

But it was Bud and Aunt Betsey who greeted her when she dismounted near the front door; and for a time, as she sat on the porch talking with Aunt Betsey, she concealed her curiosity regarding Rand.

It was Aunt Betsey who told her that Rand had ridden to the big basin to see Larry Redfern. Likewise, it was Aunt Betsey who detected the gleam of disappointment in Eleanor's eyes when the information had been given.

And later, when Aunt Betsey went into the house, leaving Bud and Eleanor together on the porch, the good lady lingered for an instant near Uncle Ephraim, in the kitchen, smiling contentedly.

Uncle Ephraim threw a furtive glance over the rims of his glasses and noted the smile of his better half.

"Somethin' ticklin' you, I reckon?" he inquired insinuatingly.

Aunt Betsey laughed tremulously, and whispered into Ephraim's ear.

That gentleman sat erect, looking at her with wide-open mouth.

"You don't say!" he gasped.

"Eph!" she declared. "She's goin' to love him!"

Uncle Ephraim's eyes brightened. It was not a gleam of disbelief that came into them; it was a light that reflected a desire to be completely assured.

"Shucks," he grunted; "how do *you* know?"

She smiled gently. "I've got eyes, ain't I? An' there's signs. Eph," she added, mischievously; "I hate to admit it, but that Seddon girl acts toward Beaudry just like I used to *feel* toward you. When Beaudry's around her she's always watchin' him when he ain't lookin' at her — with a kind of yearnin' which is somethin' like the way a mother looks at a child; an' when he ain't around she looks plumb disappointed. An' twice, after I told her Beaudry'd gone to the big basin, she sighed."

Uncle Ephraim settled back into his chair, clearing his throat.

"Well," he said loyally; "she might do a heap worse. Beaudry's a chunk of dynamite which the right woman could mold into a hunk of putty, I reckon."

Unaware of the fact that the old people were discussing her, but feeling just a trifle lonesome despite the presence of Bud, Eleanor looked at her pupil with steady, counterfeit sternness.

"Bud," she said slowly; "you don't call the sorrel horse names any more — do you?"

"No!" declared Bud.

"You don't — er — 'cuss' any more at all?"

"It ain't nice to cuss."

"That's true. No really intelligent person — that is, no smart man, or woman" — she added, when she observed that Bud did not comprehend the "intelligent" — "cusses the things God has made. And God made everything that walks, runs, swims, or flies — horses, cows, dogs, birds, men, women, boys, and girls — everything. And it is silly to cuss at things that can't hear you — things like a chair, for instance, or a rock that you stub your toe on — or anything like that."

"I know it," said Bud positively; "you told me that before."

Bud sat there long without speaking; he seemed to be gravely meditating. And, having other thoughts just at that moment — thoughts that centered upon a certain rider who was to visit a certain basin — Miss Seddon almost forgot Bud.

Trouble was swimming in Bud's eyes; his little fore-

head grew wrinkled with it; his lips stuck out in a sullen pout as he watched Miss Seddon. Miss Seddon was reminded of his presence when she heard him say belligerently:

"My dad is a smart man!"

The lady started and looked at Bud, to see a truculent glare in his eyes.

"My dad *is* a smart man!" repeated Bud, with emphasis.

"Why, of course!" said the lady, wondering.

This was a concession, and Bud looked triumphant. And his voice was triumphant as he added:

"An' my dad cusses, too — an' he's smart!"

Miss Seddon sat erect, and a stain appeared in each of her cheeks. She leaned forward.

"Bud!" she said reprovingly. "He doesn't!"

"He does!" declared Bud, with a vehemence that equaled the lady's. "He cusses — lots. He cusses the sorrel horse; he cusses the saddle — when he puts it on!"

"Bud," said the lady, her voice very low and solemn — so that Bud scented wickedness in the air — "Bud," she repeated slowly; "your dad doesn't cuss in your presence? That is — he doesn't cuss where you can hear him?"

"My dad's smart — an' he cusses every day!" declared Bud. "He cussed this mornin' before he went away. I heard him. He put me on the gatepost an' cussed the

sorrel horse, an' the gate, an' the basin. I'll tell you what he said," Bud offered generously; "he said——"

"Sh!" cautioned the lady; "don't say it!"

"Then I won't!" said Bud, with a quick look at her.

For a time Bud was very quiet. He was thinking, and his thoughts were vague and far, and yet they took coherent shape after a while. He dimly felt that if swearing always brought a lovely lady to remonstrate with one, why, there was some virtue in swearing, after all. And he wondered if that was why Rand swore—to bring the lady to his side.

Bud became aware that the lady had come very close to him. He felt her hand on his head, and her breath stirring his hair. And then her cheek was snuggled against his.

And then came her voice, low and soft—like a whispering breeze:

"Bud," it said; "tell me what dad said about the basin."

"Sure!" he vowed, reckless with the intoxication of her presence; "I'll tell you *everything* he said *anything* about! I'll tell you——"

"Just about the basin, Bud!"

"He said—" and Bud paused, for he wanted to be certain the lady wished him to repeat the words.

"Yes?" she whispered, encouragingly.

"He said: 'Damn the basin! And damn Larry Red-

fern! Don't the damn fool know Miss Seddon is comin' this mornin'?'"

The lady emitted a pleased gasp, which sounded very much like a laugh. And, gathering courage, Bud searched his memory for more profanity.

"Bud!" The lady's voice broke in on his thoughts.

"Yes."

"Your dad didn't always cuss?"

"No."

"When did you hear him, first—when did he begin to swear?" Her cheek was pressed tightly to his. "Think hard, Bud!" she encouraged.

"He cussed one night, an' you come the next day."

"What did he cuss, Bud?"

"The sorrel horse."

"Bud?"

"Yes."

"Did he keep on cussing after—after I came?"

"Yes—he cusses all the time."

The lady hid her head on Bud's shoulder, and her body moved with convulsive motions singularly like those which had agitated his father's shoulders on the night Bud had heard him cuss the first time.

But presently she raised her head, and Bud observed that her face was radiant, and that her eyes were shining with a soft brilliance.

"Bud," she said; "promise me that you will never, never cuss again! For," she added, smiling, "your dad is going to promise me the same thing!"

"Dad will be smart, then?"

"Oh!" she laughed. "Dad is smart, now — almost too smart!"

And then she put him down and told him to "run" in to Aunt Betsey. When he vanished through the doorway she descended the steps and walked to a corner of the pasture fence, where she stood for a long time with a glow in her eyes that would have caused Bud to wonder much — had he been there to see it.

It was not very many minutes later that Eleanor heard a sound behind her. She turned, to see Rand, on Midnight, within a dozen feet of her. There was a pleased grin on Rand's face — and Midnight looked moist — as though he had run far and fast.

The girl tried hard to keep the leap out of her voice; but she knew he detected it, for she saw his eyes widen.

"Why," she said. "Bud told me you had gone to the basin, to meet Larry Redfern!"

"I met him comin' here," he grinned. "Larry's accommodatin'. Almost too accommodatin'," he added, the grin fading and a frown succeeding it. "For you see, ma'am; I lit out early, intendin' to be away so's I wouldn't be interferin' with Bud's education."

"How considerate you are!" she said, in a voice that made him look intently at her. "You don't mean to tell me that you *deliberately* left Bud to me?"

"I thought you could take care of him."

"So I can. And so you *wanted* to go to the basin?"

Again he looked intently at her — and this time he saw the guile in her eyes. His face reddened.

"Well, I don't reckon I wanted to go *awful* bad. It was thinkin' you'd have a hard time with Bud that sent me. But now that I'm back I'd like it mighty well if you'd go ridin' with me."

"And neglect Bud?"

"There's Aunt Betsey."

"And not do anything with his education today?"

"Shucks! I expect he ain't in a powerful hurry to be educated, ma'am — no boy is."

"Well," she said, noting his earnestness; "I shall go with you — this time."

She got on Silver, and together they rode over the shallow water of the river toward the timber.

And it was not until they reached the fallen log — where Lefty Morgan had seen them — that Miss Seddon again referred to Bud; though they had talked gaily on indifferent subjects during the ride.

Rand had taken her to a section of the timber which she never had visited — the northern section, where a

big tableland behind them frowned above the tree tops—and Miss Seddon insisted on exploring the place.

A fallen log—the trunk of a mighty giant which had yielded to the ravages of age; its branches and limbs stripped of their green foliage—reminded Miss Seddon of the spot where Rand had killed the wolf upon a day that was still vivid in her recollection.

A malicious impulse seized the girl as she walked to the log and seated herself upon it—Rand standing at a little distance, watching her.

"Swearing is a terrible habit—isn't it?" she remarked calmly.

"It sure ain't polite," returned Rand.

"But there are worse habits."

"I reckon."

"Lying, for instance," she said, fixing him with a direct, unsmiling glance. "In my opinion there is nothing so vicious as lying."

"I expect lyin' is a bad habit, ma'am," he said. His brows were drawn together; there was a perplexed light in his eyes, and he watched her narrowly, for it seemed to him that she was obliquely striking at him.

"And yet you lied to me," she said.

"Why, I reckon, ma'am," he began. And then he saw the sarcastic gleam in her eyes. He stepped forward and stood close to her. And when he saw that she was not

indignant — or that mirth was fighting with indignation for the mastery — he said, lowly and earnestly:

"Bud's been givin' me away!"

And then he turned from her — but not swiftly enough to conceal from her eyes the glee that was gleaming in his own.

She got up and turned her back to him, standing very rigid, her chin raised disdainfully. She felt that if she faced him he would see the pardon for his offense in her eyes, and she didn't want him to think that it could be so easily given.

There followed a long silence; and then she heard Rand step close to her. His voice was low and serious, and there was a vibrant appeal in it that brought a fugitive smile to her face.

"I'm beggin' your pardon," he said.

She made no answer, merely shrugging her shoulders and keeping her face averted.

He cleared his throat. Flashing a glance at him, Miss Seddon saw that he was looking downward, his chin on his chest. He was sure he had offended her beyond pardon; though in his mind at this minute was no blame for Bud — only a grim humor, and a curiosity to know what the boy had told her.

"As to Bud's cussin'—" he began, when she did not answer.

"The idea!" she interrupted. "Teaching a little boy to swear! Why did you do it?"

"Shucks!" he said; "I reckon I was sure a boxhead. But I couldn't think of any other way to get you to come over to the Three Bar——"

"For shame!"

He stepped closer to her. "I didn't teach him a whole lot of it," he said. "Between the two of us — if we go about it earnestly — we can cure him mighty rapid."

"I detest a liar," she said.

His face paled; but of course she did not see it, for she still stood with her back to him. But she heard him move, and a blush suffused her face — for she was certain he was approaching her. And she was prepared to forgive him — in fact, she had never blamed him very much.

However, he was moving away from her. She heard his step grow fainter, and the color fled from her cheeks.

"Rand."

Her voice was soft, and it brought him to a halt before he had taken half a dozen steps.

He did not speak, looking wonderingly at her back.

"Of course," came her voice again, low and gentle; "there are liars — *and* liars."

"It wasn't such an *awful* crime," he said, hopefully.

"And if," she added, not seeming to know he had

spoken; "there was a chance that a liar might reform——"

"I know *one* man who won't lie again!" he said.

"And would promise never to lie to me again——"

"I promise."

"Or teach Bud to lie——"

"I promise."

"Why, I might forgive him," she finished.

He was close to her by this time, his eyes alight with knowledge and aflame with a joy that made the girl's eyes droop when she saw them.

A little later, sitting on the fallen tree trunk — where, from his lofty concealment Lefty Morgan had seen them — Rand drew a great, long breath and patted the hand that lay so confidingly in his.

"An' you say you hearin' Bud swear wasn't what made you come to the Three Bar?" he asked — again.

"No," she smiled; "I should have come — anyway — because — because I wanted to."

He grinned — and patted the hand again.

"Well," he said, soberly; "I wasn't takin' any chances."

CHAPTER XXI

STRIKING DEEP

DUSK had fallen when Miss Seddon returned to the Bar S. Her face was flushed, and her eyes eloquent with a light that had never been in them before when she turned Silver into the corral and carried the saddle and bridle into the lean-to near the stable, where she hung them from their accustomed peg.

She stood for a long time looking around her at the big world, enwrapped with the descending gloom aware of a new beauty that had come into it all; her heart singing with the new-found joy that had come to her. She felt ineffably tender toward everything — and before she went to the house she walked over to the corral called Silver to her, patted his neck — assuring him that *he* was responsible; that if he had not strayed that day when she had ridden him to the timber the first time, she would not have met Rand as she had met him — thus she might not have felt the romance that so completely surrounded him.

She went into the house after a while, to find that her father had not come in. The Mexican woman informed her that Seddon had ridden in during the afternoon, and

had left word that he would be away for the night, with the outfit.

The girl ate very little, spending much of her time at the table gazing reflectively out through a window into the growing darkness. Many times she smiled at the recollection of Rand's strategem; but most of the time she was trying to analyze the new and strange emotions that had seized her.

When she left the table she went out upon the porch, where, in a big chair, she meditated long, mentally reviewing the incidents of the day—figuratively hugging them to her and enjoying them over again. She found she could not help applauding Rand's resourcefulness.

She heard the Mexican woman washing the dishes; she saw the light in the kitchen go out, and heard the woman clumping upstairs. Still, she did not stir out of the chair. Some time later, however, peering into the plains that stretched toward town, she observed a moving blot that seemed to be coming toward her out of the starlit gloom of distance, and she got up, to watch it.

She saw, after a while, that the blot had developed into a horse and rider, and she stepped to the edge of the porch, thinking the rider might be her father.

She was not certain until the horse and rider came near the porch; and then she noted with some curiosity that the rider was a woman.

She waited, saying nothing, until the woman dismounted, trailed the reins over the animal's head, and walked forward.

There was no moon, but the countless cold stars that dotted the sky sent a flickering semilight over the dooryard, enabling her to see the woman's face. And while she was intently peering at the visitor, the latter advanced to the porch edge and spoke.

"You are Eleanor Seddon?"

At Eleanor's low "Yes," the woman looked soberly at her. She was so near now that Eleanor could see her face clearly — it was white, almost pallid, and her eyes held a wistful, haunting expression.

Eleanor did not know that the pallor was artificial, and the expression of the eyes the cleverest bit of acting the woman had ever done. The girl merely divined that here was one of her sex in trouble, seeking assistance.

"I am Lucia Morell, and I have ridden from Ocate to ask you to help me."

"I'll do what I can — of course," said Eleanor. "Won't you come in?"

But Lucia had no intention of entering the house; she felt that there was less possibility of detection outside, where the light was subdued and uncertain.

"It won't take long," she said. "I am not certain that I should have bothered you. But I — I heard that you

were with him a great deal, and I thought that your influence with him might make him relent."

She bowed her head as though humiliation rested heavily upon it.

"You heard — what?" demanded Eleanor, perplexed. She had advanced a little; she stood, leaning forward slightly, uncertain whether she had heard correctly.

"That you were with him a great deal. I've seen you. Almost every day for the past week, or more. And today I was on the mesa back of the timber, and I saw him holding your hand."

"Rand?" exclaimed Eleanor, the word startled out of her.

"Yes — Rand," said the woman, with savage bitterness. She now looked up, her eyes flashing with a jealous light. And Lucia was not acting now; there was a venomous passion in her heart against this woman who had won Rand.

"You don't know him," she went on, raising her voice and moving her hands with a passionate gesture; "you are with him every day, listening to his pretty speeches, but you don't know him. You can have him, though — I don't want him. All I want is my boy!"

"Your boy?" gasped Eleanor, breathlessly. She was rigid, her hands were clenched; and a great doubt and fear clutched at her heart.

"You don't mean—" she began.

"That's exactly what I mean!" interrupted the other. "Don't tell me that you didn't know it!" she jeered, as she saw Eleanor shrink backward and grasp one of the slender porch columns. "Don't try to play innocent with me, and pretend that you didn't know. I've watched you—and you *do* know. You know Bud is mine—and Rand's—Rand's! Do you understand?"

Lucia had not meant to be so vehement; on the way over from town she had decided to appeal to the womanly instincts in Eleanor; to instill into the girl through her appeal a bitterness against Rand for deceiving her—for not telling her that he was the father of the boy.

For Lucia knew Rand had not told about the boy—she knew Rand would never tell. And so she was sure of her ground, and her manner now, with the jealousy in her heart, was convincing.

She had convinced Eleanor. The girl held tightly to the porch column, the blackness of the night swathing her—a greater blackness within her—while the coldly glittering stars above her swirled in eccentric circles.

"Wait!" she commanded sharply, interrupting Lucia, who had launched a bitter denunciation of Rand. "It isn't necessary to talk that way. If—if what you say is true, I certainly do not care to—to take Rand from you. Why—why," she went on, uncertainly, her voice qua-

vering from the intense strain she was laboring under — for she was trying to repress her emotions — she did not want the woman to see that she cared — so very much; "I assure you that I didn't know! I shouldn't have gone there if I had! I didn't go there to — to see Rand. He told me — something — about the boy — that he needed instruction — training; and I went over there just to ——"

"Bah!" sneered Lucia. She laughed harshly. "So that's the game he played on you, eh? He wanted you to teach Bud. He's a schemer, ha, ha! He's a beau with women — he's well named. It's honey — all honey with him, at first. And then the gall. That's the way he served me! He wouldn't look at me after Bud came. And now he won't even let me see the boy!"

Eleanor was fighting hard for her composure. She did not think to doubt the woman's story, for she had wondered all along about Rand's devotion to the boy; and though she had never questioned the truth of Rand's story about Bud, it did seem strange that Rand should have adopted a nameless boy when there were many older men in the vicinity who could have taken the child in without danger of any damage to their reputations.

But she did think at this minute of Rand's attitude toward the boy; of the dark passions she had seen in Rand's eyes; of the smoldering something about him that seemed

to hint of the elemental and the irresponsible. She thought of it all as she stood there, with Lucia's flashing eyes upon her — and she suddenly saw Rand as the woman wanted her to see him — as Lucia had made her see him through the power of suggestion — a smiling hypocrite, a woman-hunter; a cold-hearted sycophant, merciless — a mocker in his triumphs.

She gained control of herself presently, and looked at Lucia with the cold calm of perfect composure.

"Is that all?" she asked. "You want nothing more — that is all you wanted to see me for?"

"I want you to help me get my boy!" declared Lucia. "You can do it — while he still likes you — before he wins you. I don't care what you are to him, or what he thinks of you. I want only my boy. If you will tell him ——"

Eleanor laughed mirthlessly. "Getting the boy is your affair," she said coldly. "I can only say this — that I shall never see Rand again, nor shall I ever speak to him — about anything!"

She turned, crossed the porch, and went into the house, standing for a long time just inside the door, pale and shaking. Then, without looking out into the night, she closed the door, took the lamp from the center table near her, and went upstairs, where she sat for many minutes huddled in a chair, in a dumb, agonized silence.

Outside, Lucia, smiling, sneering over her easy victory — and feeling no pangs of pity or remorse — for this was merely a game to her, in which the weak succumbed to the strong — mounted her horse and sent it toward town, there to meet Compton — who had told her he would wait for her — to tell him that victory — for himself and for her — was now within reach.

CHAPTER XXII

COMPTON SMILES

COMPTON left Ocate early the next morning and headed his horse into the vast level that stretched southward. Two Bar S men, their thoughts definitely dwelling upon "town" and its attendant pleasures, had ridden in late the night before. Compton had come upon them in the Gilt Edge, and from them he learned that Seddon was with the outfit on a branch of the Canadian.

Another Bar S man arriving in Ocate the morning before had informed Compton that Seddon was spending practically all of his time with the outfit, and it had been upon that information that Compton had acted in sending Lucia Morell to the Bar S ranchhouse, to talk with Eleanor. For Compton had not wanted Seddon to be near when Lucia visited the Bar S.

Compton smiled many times as he rode, for Lucia had told him that Eleanor seemed to be convinced of her entire truthfulness. And Compton had seen in Lucia's dark, flashing eyes a reflection of the conviction of success.

In his talks with Lucia, Compton had discovered that Lucia, Rand, and Seddon himself were the only persons

in the country who knew of Seddon's illegitimate intimacy with the dance-hall girl. And therefore there was no other proof of Bud's parentage — and even that proof was not conclusive.

For Seddon would deny responsibility in the matter — he had already denied it through his continued silence. Rand had not divulged the secret; and Compton was convinced he would not divulge it. In fact, Rand would not dare to accuse Seddon — for he had no proof except his own word — and all Ocate suspected Rand himself.

Lucia Morell's word, added to that of one or the other of the two men, would be the deciding factor in the determining of responsibility — and that was the factor upon which Compton depended.

And so, having determined to use Lucia as a lever with which to work himself into Eleanor's good graces, the big man rode confidently southward, to hunt Seddon.

He found the Bar S owner with the outfit, working a little level near a shallow river; and Seddon joined him at a little distance from the men, some of whom waved their hands at Compton.

Compton dismounted near the outfit wagon, and stood, watching Seddon's approach, smiling with humorous malice. For he remembered that on another day, when he had spoken to Seddon about Eleanor, the Bar S man had given him a short answer when he had declared his

intentions regarding the girl. Some trace of the smile was still in his eyes when Seddon reached him. Seddon saw it, and spoke gruffly:

"What's ticklin' *you* this mornin'?"

Compton did not answer; he stood regarding Seddon with his malicious smile. And now, with Seddon's gaze on him, Compton's smile grew mysterious. And then, when he saw that Seddon's face was slowly reddening, and that an angry, intolerant gleam was in his eyes, Compton laughed aloud — a sound in which there was mingled scorn and amusement.

"So that's the reason you and Rand don't hit it off, eh?" he said when he had enjoyed Seddon's mystification long enough.

The color went out of Seddon's face, and then surged back again until face and neck were crimson. Had Compton doubted Lucia's word, the spectacle of guilt that now stood before him would have been sufficient to convince him.

Seddon's eyes betrayed him; they held a furtive, guilty gleam.

"What you gettin' at?" he demanded.

Seddon's voice lacked spirit; and Compton laughed again.

"Bud —" he began. But Seddon, his face convulsed, interrupted him with:

"It's a lie—damn you! It's a lie—an infernal, sneakin' lie!"

"Bah!" said Compton, sneering. "You can't put that over—on me. Lucia Morell told me—she was at the girl's side when she died. Brace up! No one else knows it—not even Rand."

He watched Seddon as the latter walked with drooping shoulders to the wooden "chuck" box near the wagon, sat heavily down on it, and leaned forward, his chin in his hands, in an attitude of complete dejection.

Seddon's face was red and swollen from the passions that were rioting in him. He did not look at Compton, but kept repeating:

"Ellie will get to hearin' it; she'll hate me—she'll hear of it, an' she'll hate me!"

And when Compton walked toward him, grinning, halting near him, he said bitterly:

"I knowed I ought to have told her—long ago. There'd have been a chance then. Now——"

He got up, a frenzied look in his eyes, and stood rigid, his muscles straining, rage paling his face.

"Damn Lucia Morell! An' damn Rand—damn all of them! I'm goin' right home an' tell Ellie before any of the sneakin' skunks can get a chance to poison her against me. I'm goin'——"

"Sit down, you fool!"

Compton gripped his shoulders with a strength that made Seddon cringe; and as he was forced down upon the chuck box he seemed to yield to the compelling spirit of the big man. For again his shoulders drooped, and he became silent, staring moodily at the dust at his feet.

Compton laughed, his voice vibrating with scorn.

"You'd tell her, eh? You'd ride right over and put her wise to what a sneak you've been — and hurt her so that she'd never look at you again! Bah! What good would that do? I'll take care of this; you keep your mouth shut!

"Look here," he went on, as Seddon began to regain his composure. "I've got this thing all framed up. Last night Lucia Morell told your daughter that Bud is Rand's boy — and that she — Lucia — is the boy's mother. Understand? Well, all you've got to do is to sit tight, and Eleanor will go on believing what Lucia told her. That's simple enough, eh?"

Compton laughed as Seddon got to his feet again, pale and relieved.

"I sure thought I'd got to the end of my string," he said. And then he looked at Compton, suspicion in his eyes.

"What you expectin' to get out of this? What did you frame it up for?"

"For Eleanor," declared the big man, with a level

sober glance at the other. "I want her, and I'm going to have her!

"She's been running over to the Three Bar every day for more than a week—staying until dark, or after. Rand has got her going—she's dead in love with him. I've had Lefty Morgan watching them for a week; and yesterday he saw them alone in the timber—Rand holding her hand and trying to mush with her.

"Don't think I don't know what has happened. You didn't give Rand that bill of sale for Midnight on your own hook; he made you give it to him. Why? Because you were afraid he would squeal about the boy. I didn't know why you had given it to him until Lucia Morell told me what was what. But I know now! And Rand doesn't get Eleanor. Understand? I'll see to that. You stick to Lucia's story—if it comes to a show-down—or if Eleanor asks you. If you don't I'll have Lucia tell a new story to Eleanor—and it will be the truth—don't forget that!"

Seddon stood, clenching and unclenching his hands, his face crimson again.

"Compton," he said thickly, looking intensely at the big man, "you don't mean any harm to Ellie?"

"Bah!" laughed the other. "I want to marry her, that's all—if you call that 'harm'."

Compton got on his horse and rode away, heading

straight for the Bar S. And with him he carried Seddon's permission to play the suitor to his daughter — if she would permit. And on the big man's face as he rode was a smile of triumph; for now he was certain there was no possibility of defeat for him.

CHAPTER XXIII

A NEW RIDING COMPANION

ELEANOR SEDDON was alone on the porch of the Bar S ranchhouse; she had been alone nearly all morning — except when the Mexican woman came to the front door and stood for a long time peering out, studying the girl's face. The Mexican woman wondered why Eleanor did not ride northward today — as she had been in the habit of doing.

And Silver, in the corral, eager for the daily gallop over the river trail, looked many times toward the ranchhouse during the morning, whinnying his impatience.

But Eleanor, unconscious of the concern of her friends, sat in a chair and stared with dulled eyes out into the vacant world.

She started, and sighed with relief when, late in the morning, she glanced westward and saw Link Compton coming. But her face was very pale and her lips were set tightly when she greeted the man; for when she had become convinced that the rider really was Compton, she had decided to question him about Lucia Morell and Rand. For during the night she had seized upon the only

hope that presented itself to her — the hope that Lucia Morell had lied.

To be sure, she divined that there was a certain enmity between Rand and Compton, but she reflected that no man — unless he were an unprincipled scoundrel — would lie to a woman upon so grave a matter; and though she had seen in Compton signs of a rather heavy sensuousness, she was convinced that even he would be fair to his enemy.

And upon this day Compton was at his best. The smile on his face was genial when he dismounted near the porch; there was a gleam of sincere admiration in his eyes as he looked at Eleanor after taking the chair she offered; and there was a deference in his manner, a studied politeness, which almost convinced her that on that other day she had judged him too harshly.

"I was here the other day," he said, smiling at her, "but you were away — riding. And so I came again, hoping for better luck."

"You came from the west," she said; "did you see father?"

"Yes," he returned, "I was abroad early this morning, for I had to see your father on some business connected with the vigilance committee. Some more of my cattle were stolen the other night — and something must be done."

He had noted the pallor of her face, and his thoughts ad run humorously to Lucia's visit — and before him, in e ghastly paleness of Eleanor's face, was the evidence f that visit. And he had told the lie about the cattle erely for the purpose of inducing her to talk about Rand - he wanted to discover how badly Lucia's story had hurt er.

Eleanor, too, had desired the talk about Rand, and ompton's speech gave her the opportunity she had meant contrive. Somehow it seemed to her that he would ention Rand; and so, when she slowly inquired: Whom do you suspect?" and Compton answered ortly: "Rand," she was not surprised. And looking enly at her, Compton marveled at her composure.

"What makes you think Rand stole the cattle?" she quired.

He laughed deeply, as though the question were eighted with humor.

"Well," he said, "I am not the first man who has sus- cted Rand of stealing cattle — or of doing worse. You e, Miss Seddon, a man's reputation has much to do th the way a community judges him."

"Do you mean that Rand has an evil reputation?"

"Well," he said, watching her covertly, "there is ill- eling between Rand and myself because of his attitude out water. And so I don't care to be hard on him. But

it is my opinion——" He hesitated, cleared his throat and then became silent.

"I—I see," she said, gulping, "you don't want to con demn him." And at this minute the generosity of the bi man seated near her impressed her quite as deeply a had Rand's on the day she had questioned him about th water.

"But," she said, determined to continue this conversa tion, "that attitude is a false one, isn't it? For if Ran is guilty of anything—any crime—people should tal about him, shouldn't they? And," she continued, affect ing unconcern, though her muscles were swelling and he heart thumping with the effort she was making to appea calm, "you spoke of Rand doing worse. What is ther worse than stealing cattle?"

Compton concealed a smile with the palm of one o his hands before he answered—for he knew what was i her mind. And his voice seemed to be burdened with re luctance.

"There's talk of a girl—a dance-hall girl of Ocat And there's a boy—Bud; I think his name is—" H paused and looked at her, and saw her hands clenc tightly.

"Who is the dance-hall girl?" she questioned. Sh knew this talk was not conventional, and she was stricke with horror over the impulse that had moved her to as

he question; but the terrible doubt and curiosity she had ielded to had compelled her to speak. She sat, her face ead-white, in the silence that followed her words. She id not look at Compton — she did not dare, for had he een her eyes at this moment he must have seen the trained anxiety in them.

"Lucia Morell," said Compton, slowly watching her, is eyes glittering with a vindictive amusement.

She had wanted corroboration — and she had it now. And her heart was a dead-weight within her. And yet, eenly watching her, Compton was thrilled with admiraon for the manner in which she received the blow.

Her face was pallid, and there was mute agony in the ook she threw at Compton as she got up and stood, meetng his gaze fairly.

And Compton saw, back of the agony in her eyes, the awning light of a great resentment and indignation.

Compton's strategem had been a success, he knew, yet e kept his face expressionless, concealing his satisfaction ehind a studied aloofness, which gave the girl the impreson that he knew nothing of her thoughts.

He even helped her. Smiling, pretending he did not ee the agony in her eyes, he got up also.

"It's a great morning for a ride, Miss Seddon," he aid: "won't you go with me for a short gallop?"

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

And while Compton roped Silver, and saddled and bridled him, the girl was in the house changing her dress.

The reaction had come swiftly, and when she emerged from the house to meet Compton there was no sign in her eyes or in her manner to indicate that a romance upon which she had built dreams had been shattered.

CHAPTER XXIV

PICKING A LEADER

OCATE, as far from civilization in spirit as it was, geographically, from the nearest railroad, was not without a certain civic pride. It had been that pride — strong in the breasts of a considerable number of the town's citizens, which had kept Ocate from becoming what a number of western cow towns had become, a place where the criminal element could meet in perfect security.

Immunity from the law was not to be found in Ocate, for the sturdy and honest citizens of the town were in a majority, and they demanded from the law the protection from evildoers that the law provided.

Webster was a renegade — a recreant from the principles he had voiced when seeking election. And there were many citizens of Ocate who had observed Webster's growing intimacy with the lawless from sections of the country beyond the stretching plains that surrounded the town. These men had drifted in, and many of them had stayed. For the decent citizens of the town could see them — swaggering in and out of the saloons, cursing, gambling, fighting.

Moggs, the agent of the express company, had been

as observant as any of Ocate's good citizens. He had noted Webster's intimacy with the lawless idlers that lately, in always increasing numbers, had been coming to town, and it had been upon Moggs' recommendation communicated to certain other good citizens, in secret, that the vigilance committee, headed by Link Compton, had been formed.

Link Compton had a reputation for honesty and square dealing. He was known to be a force; a driving spirit for good in the community. He was magnetic, seemed to be capable, and in the secret meeting of the newly formed vigilance committee his voice was raised loudest for protection from the depredations of the thieves who had begun to infest Ocate and the surrounding country.

However, Moggs — deeply concerned over the interests of the company he represented — did not fail to continue to observe the trend of the people of Ocate toward lawlessness. There had always been a doubt in his mind concerning Compton — he had not been deceived by the big man's counterfeit straightforwardness.

Thus it was that on the morning Slim Kinney descended to the street and stood on the board sidewalk carefully examining his guns, Moggs, rising early, had watched him from behind the curtains of a window in his sleeping quarters above the office of the express company.

On the previous night Moggs had seen Kinney with

Webster, and, looking into the Gilt Edge later, he had seen Kinney, Webster, and Compton sitting companionably at a table.

Moggs did not know Kinney, but he disliked the man at first sight. And so, on the morning, he saw Kinney looking at his weapons, his interest in the man became acute.

After descending to the office, Moggs continued to watch Kinney — missing his breakfast to do so.

He had mentioned Kinney's peculiar conduct to Val Davis, his assistant — who shared Moggs' sleeping quarters — and Davis had laughed carelessly.

"That guy standin' there pickin' his teeth?" Davis asked. "Hell," he continued at Moggs' nod; "he's harmless, I reckon. One of them fourflushers which go around totin' two guns for show."

But Moggs still nursed his suspicions. And when a little later a Swede named Carlson entered the office with a parcel directed to his wife, in Carlson's native land, Moggs' suspicions were confirmed.

"Dat guy," Carlson informed Moggs, "bane one gunfighter. He's Bernalillo tough. He's no good guy." Carlson laughed. "He's got badge on hes vest which say he bane deppity sheriff. Haw, haw! If guys lak Slim Kinney bane deppity sheriff, this town she's go to hell queeck!"

"You knew him at Bernalillo?" questioned Moggs.

"Sure—I bane know heem. I stop at Bernalillo one year. Kinney he's bad guy—he's mak' trouble lak any-t'ing. He's keel—lak dat!" Carlson snapped his fingers.

And so Moggs continued to nurse his suspicions. He watched Kinney further. And, just before Beaudry Rand rode into town, Moggs saw Compton in a doorway behind Kinney whispering to the man. Compton vanished, and Kinney turned to look up the street.

Moggs, too, glanced up the street, and he saw Rand riding into town. And when the two met near the hitching rail where Kinney had been worsted in the gunfight, Moggs had been a witness to all that had transpired. In the silence he had heard Rand's voice, when he had said to Kinney:

"You figured to perforate me, pretendin I'd resist arrest. I've called the law bluff. If you've got any man in you, you'll flash your guns—now!"

Rand's words had a significance to Moggs, for they indicated that Rand possessed knowledge of the motive behind Kinney's attack on him—back of the gunfighter's forbidding preparations, and back of the silent drama in which Webster, Compton, and the gunfighter had been the actors in the Gilt Edge the night before the clash.

But Moggs had kept silent regarding his suspicions, for

he had not been able to get time to visit the Three Bar to speak to Rand about them. But on the morning of Compton's visit to Eleanor Seddon, Moggs saw Rand ride into town and dismount in front of a store. And shortly afterward Rand was in the express office, in response to Moggs' call, talking with the agent. Val Davis, at work with some packages, was an interested listener.

"It was a frame-up, eh?" said Moggs, his eyes gleaming — after Rand had told him about the midnight affair. "I'd been suspecting something like that in connection with Webster and Compton. I don't blame you a damned bit! Why didn't you blow Kinney apart instead of just shooting a finger off him?"

Rand grinned faintly, remarking slowly: "I reckon I wasn't in a killin' mood that day, Moggs."

"Lord, man; you had *nerve* to buck Kinney at *that* game! Did you know him?" At Rand's slow nod he went on: "And, knowing that, you played her a lone hand! I'd call that mighty unusual!"

"Unusual? Oh, don't!" grinned Rand. "It shaped up so's I had to make the law for myself, an' I did it. Law in Ocate is runnin' to crooks an' plug-uglies."

"It's time for a new deal!" declared Moggs. "We'll form a new vigilance committee, and if Webster doesn't go straight, we'll run him out of town." He looked keenly at Rand, lowering his voice a trifle.

"Would you be willing to head the new vigilance committee?"

A pulse of emotion shot through Rand — Moggs saw it; saw his face redden and his eyes glow. But Rand shook his head.

"I've heard there's been talk goin' around to the effect that I know more about the stealin' that's been goin' on around here than any honest man ought to know," he said.

"Hell!" exploded Moggs; "who is saying that? It's news to me. Moreover, it's a damned lie. Every square man in this section swears by you. And," he went on, an admiring light in his eyes and determination in his voice, "every man knows you can't be scared or bluffed. And whether you want it or not, we're going to make you head the new committee! You've got to accept!"

CHAPTER XXV

RAND'S BLAZING WRATH

RAND had accepted. He rode out of town with an emotion of grim elation tugging at his heart. For in Moggs' demand that he head the new vigilance committee, he saw vindication of himself in the minds of those honest men of Ocate who must have heard the stories his enemies had circulated about him.

He saw more—he felt more. In the trust that Moggs had imposed upon him, he saw what Moggs had not seen—what no man would ever see, and what many men would never suspect—the help they were giving him toward conquering his lust to kill any man who provoked him to wrath.

For if he headed the vigilance committee, he would be compelled to restrain the wild passion to which he had been on the verge of yielding many times; he would have to set a standard of cold, deliberate action by which all the activities of the committee would be shaped—and he would save himself from his passion by governing the passions of other men.

Also, the fact that he had been chosen to head the committee would vindicate him in the eyes of Eleanor Seddon,

and he wanted her approval more than he desired the approval of the people of Ocate.

And so he rode homeward, exultant, his pulses leaping, a huge, satisfied grin on his face. For it seemed to him that the world was going very well with him; and that if ever a man had reason to rejoice, it was he.

But not long did his mind dwell upon the honor that had been offered him. He kept thinking of Eleanor Seddon. Since that day in town, four years ago, when he had seen her getting into the stage to go away to school, he had treasured a mental picture of her. Many times when thinking of her he had devised plans to meet her — when she should finish school and come back to the Bar S.

And the plan he had finally accepted was not the one he had used at all. For upon that day when she had come riding out of the southern haze toward the timber he had discarded his plan and had ridden into the timber after her.

Nor since the meeting with her in the timber had things gone as he had often mentally planned. It was all a new game to him, and he had discovered that it was not a game of rules and plans, that it could not be played with premeditation. It was not a game at all — it was a scheme of nature, and it was governed by the depth of a man's desires.

He kept seeing Eleanor as she had stood with her back

to him in the timber, when she had charged him with lying to her. For a moment — when he had seen her raise her chin so disdainfully — he had felt there could be no pardon for him. And he still remembered how his heart had jumped when he had heard her voice calling softly to him — telling him there were liars *and* liars. He would never forget the emphasis she had placed upon that little word, "and."

And so, riding and thinking of the girl, he came at last to the Three Bar. He was about to turn Midnight into the corral when he saw a strange horse tethered at the corral fence.

The Three Bar had a visitor, and he looked from the strange horse to the porch of the ranchhouse — to see, sitting in a chair, talking with Bud, the girl who had ridden to the Three Bar one night to warn him of Compton's plot to kill him.

His lips straightened a little as he walked toward his visitor; for though he appreciated what she had done for him, he did not purpose to permit her to visit the Three Bar whenever the mood struck her. He grinned at the thought — Eleanor might be jealous.

Rand did not reach the porch. Lucia had seen him coming, and when he started toward her she got off the porch and advanced to meet him. Rand halted near the gatepost upon which Bud had sat many times to "cuss"

the sorrel, and looked gravely at Lucia as she came and stood near him.

"I reckon you're wantin' me for somethin'?" he said. "You must have taken the north trail—us not meetin'. For I've just come from town."

There was no welcome for her in his voice; it was even slightly cold, as though he resented her coming. And his eyes, as they searched hers inquiringly, lacked the warmth she wished to see in them.

Lucia's plan had never agreed with Compton's. When Compton sat in her room that day arranging the plot, a feature of which Lucia had carried out when she went to lie to Eleanor Seddon about the parentage of Bud, Lucia's brain had been athrob with another plan. She had not mentioned the plan to Compton because she knew it would interfere with his—because Lucia knew the perfect working out of her plan would mean the complete failure of Compton's.

Lucia did not expect to win Rand entirely for herself; if she could induce him—or even force him—to give her a portion of that love she craved, she would be satisfied. And the success of her plan would be a blow at Compton—whom she now hated more than ever.

She smiled, her dark eyes drooping from his.

"Yes," she said; "I took the north trail. I didn't want to see you in town—I wanted to see you here, where no

one can hear me. For I have something terrible to tell you."

She had stepped forward until she was close to him, and she now placed both hands on his shoulders and held them tightly, so that she looked into his eyes, her face close to his.

He started at the word she used, stiffened, and lowered his head, looking at her with a level, intent gaze. He had a presentiment that Lucia's visit somehow involved Eleanor, and he said shortly:

"About Miss Seddon?"

"Yes," she replied, and held his shoulders in a firmer grip. "But first," she added, getting an expression of eloquent appeal in her eyes, "I want you to promise not to hurt me. For I had to do it, Rand — Compton made me do it!"

She felt his muscles leap and twitch.

"Do what?" he demanded. "Talk!" he said hoarsely, when she did not reply at once. "What did Compton make you do?"

"Made me lie to Eleanor Seddon. He sent me there last night — to the Bar S. He told me he would kill me if I didn't go. So I went. And I lied about you to her. I told her ——"

Her voice trailed off to a whisper as she related the story she had told Eleanor Seddon, and when she finished

her back was against the corral fence; Rand's hands were at her throat, his face twisted in a malignant rage, the cords of his neck standing out, the muscles ripping, telling of the terrific effort he was making to control himself, to keep from strangling her.

For a short space he held her thus, while she cowered from the blazing wrath in his eyes, the disgust, the scorn, the contempt and loathing of his look.

She saw the battle go in her favor, and she knew he was not going to kill her — for he had won back his self-control. But the cold glare of his eyes as he dropped his hands to his sides frightened her more than ever.

Still, she had come to gain what she could out of the wreck she had made, and while he stood there, breathing fast, his eyes agleam with a cold fire that told of the passion that was consuming him, she crept close to him, whispering:

"I'll go to her, Rand; I'll tell her it isn't so — that I lied to her. I'll smooth it all out for you, Rand; I'll do anything you say — if you will only love me a little."

There it was — the grotesque thought which had dominated her throughout; the determination to save what she could out of the miserable chaos of evil into which Compton had driven her. She could not permit Compton to win over Rand — she hated Compton too heartily for that. Nor could she win Rand. She knew that. The best she

could hope for was that Rand, understanding that she had been driven to do what she had done, would forgive her and grant her some measure of the love for which she longed.

But she saw the denial of that wish in Rand's eyes. She saw more — she saw cold contempt in them, a loathing too intense for words, and a bitter fury that made her gasp with the realization that her plan had failed.

Just when it seemed that Rand's wrath was about to break into violent, destroying action, she saw his lips twitch. He laughed — with a sound that froze her into breathless immobility.

"And if I don't agree to love you — a little — what will you do then?"

The cold scorn in his voice stung her to passionate resentment. She saw the dawn of hatred in his eyes — a savage, bitter glow which told her that henceforth he would think of her as something repulsive — too vile to notice. She became on the instant a woman who did not care — the detestable creature he thought her. And she looked straight at him, her eyes wanton with passionate mockery.

"I'll tell her nothing, then. I'll let her believe what I have told her. And she'll never learn the truth. For there is no proof, Rand — not a shred! It's your word against mine and Compton's — and Seddon's. For Sed-

don will lie, Rand — he'll lie to save his own precious reputation."

She expected her words would hurt Rand. To her astonishment he laughed again — deep in his throat; a sound that had no mirth in it — the laugh of a man who has lost something he knows he can never regain.

"You're through, eh?" he said. "An' that's what it means — that you've done this thing, hopin' I'd like you a little? Bah! I like you so well that I'd roast in hell for a thousand years before I'd let Eleanor Seddon know I'd ever looked at you! Get out of here now — get back to town — to your damned coyote friend — an' thank God that you're not a man — so I could tear the damned heart out of you!"

There was a cold flame in his eyes that awed her; and she slipped sidewise along the fence and to her horse, which she mounted. After taking up the reins, though, she laughed spitefully, her face convulsed with rage.

"You wouldn't let her know you ever saw me, eh? She's too good — too pure, too innocent. Ha, ha! Before Link Compton gets through with her *she'll* not be fit to look at me, either!"

She slapped her horse viciously and rode toward Ocate. Rand, white and tense, his muscles straining as he held to the top rail of the corral fence, watched her until she vanished beyond the crest of a rise.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE YEARNING FOR VENGEANCE

RETURNING from her ride with Compton, Eleanor found her father waiting for her on the big front orch. He looked keenly at her when she came close to im, and he knew from the dull, apathetic expression of er eyes that Compton had corroborated Lucia's story— nd that Eleanor believed Rand guilty.

However, Seddon was not the man to permit an opportunity to slip by—and this was his chance to make the ase strong against Rand. And if Eleanor believed Lucia, here would never be any more dread in Seddon's heart hat Rand would tell about the boy; he could again live as e had yearned to live—without the fear that one day leanor would discover the truth and grow to despise him.

Seddon gave no thought to Eleanor—that she might uffer much mental agony. He had a vague impression hat she seemed to be slightly troubled; but he had no oubt that Link Compton could cure *that* trouble. At any ate, *he* was safe.

"You was with Link, Ellie? He said he was ridin' ver here."

She sank into a chair, nodding affirmatively.

"Where'd you leave Link?"

"In the big basin," she replied.

Compton had been agreeable, but the pleasure she had got out of the ride with him had been negative, for she had not been able to get her thoughts off Rand. She still nursed a doubt — and now she meant to determine if there was reason for it.

"Daddy," she said firmly, "do you know a woman named Lucia Morell?"

"Yes," returned Seddon. He was glad Eleanor was not looking at him.

"She was here last night. She came to tell me that she is the mother of Rand's boy — Bud — and that Rand is its father. Is that true?"

"I reckon it is, Ellie. Leastwise, it's common talk."

"Why didn't you tell me — before?"

"I wasn't reckonin' to say mean things about Rand," he replied virtuously. "You'll recollect that I told you once not to go hangin' around the Three Bar — an' the timber. That's what I meant, Ellie."

The girl remembered. She got up silently and went into the house. Half an hour later Seddon went in. Not finding Eleanor in any of the lower rooms he went upstairs and knocked on the door of her bedroom, asking her to come down for supper.

She told him she did not wish to be disturbed, and Sed-

lon went downstairs again and sat for some time on the porch, gazing thoughtfully through the evening haze oward the Three Bar. And as he sat there a haunting ear came into his soul, for he half expected to see Rand ome riding out of the haze to exact the vengeance he had hreatened should Seddon defame him to the girl who, in er room, was sobbing bitterly into her pillow.

But Rand did not come riding out of the haze upon an rrand of vengeance. Nor did he ride to the Bar S the ext day — or the next. If he had come, Eleanor would ave known that he cared. But because he did not come he felt that he must lack the courage to face her. For on he following day Compton rode over again and told her hat Lucia Morell had visited Rand, and had told Rand hat she had informed Eleanor of their intimacy.

"That's why you asked me about the boy?" said Compon, when he related the story to Eleanor.

Eleanor reddened. "Please don't speak of it again," he said, with a flash of indignation.

And Compton did not speak of it again. However, he poke of other things. And as the days fled and Rand did ot appear, Compton and Eleanor rode abroad many mes.

The big man exerted himself to please, and when he hose he could make his magnetism felt by women.

Eleanor was conscious of the lure of him, and yet she

did not yield to it. For she was beginning to realize that her faith in Rand had been stronger than she had thought. And she kept seeing him as he had looked at her that day in the timber when she had told him she detested a liar—the earnest wistfulness of him, the sincerity gleaming in his eyes; his subterfuge to get her to visit the Three Bar—all those things were vivid in her mind, and would not be denied. Thus, Compton's progress was slow.

He knew, however, that he would win. His confidence was in his eyes, in his manner, and in his voice.

At the Three Bar was another man whose confidence was sadly shaken. In fact, he had no confidence in himself at all. For he did not know at what moment the driving intensity of his yearning to kill would conquer him. The rending, tearing passions that reigned in his heart; the hideous, volcanic impulses which tugged at him were daily becoming more wild and insistent. They were blighting him; they were destroying all his good impulses so that even when he looked at his mother's picture on the wall of his bedroom, his heart was full of the poison of hatred.

Many times, looking at the picture, his lips wreathed into a cold, twisting, sardonic grin—and only the reproachful eyes of the woman kept him from yielding to the terrible longing for vengeance—the yearning to kill Compton.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE MARKINGS OF MIDNIGHT

CARTER, Lefty Morgan, and Slim Kinney were playing cards in the Two Link bunkhouse on a night about two weeks following the day Eleanor Seddon had listened to Lucia Morell's fabrication about Rand. The kerosene lamp on the rough table between the card-players had a smoke-begrimed chimney, but in the light from the lamp the faces of the men revealed the intentness with which they strove for victory.

Slim Kinney's finger had not completely healed, but he handled his cards dexterously with it — though at times he mumbled threats against the man who had injured it.

The drive northward with the stolen mavericks had been profitable, and the faces of the men revealed their satisfaction. During a deal Carter grinned at the others.

"Link's makin' the divvy tomorrow," said Carter. "We'll hit town tomorrow night."

Expansive grins greeted this announcement. But with the cards in his hand, ready to distribute, the dealer paused and sat silent, facing the door in a listening attitude.

"Someone's comin', hell-bent!" he said.

During the silence which followed his words the men could hear the rapid drumming of hoofs.

With a concerted movement the men got up and crowded to the door, peering out into the starlighted night toward the southern distance — from which direction the sounds seemed to come.

The horseman must have been close when the dealer heard the sounds of his coming, for it was not many minutes before a blot took shape in the level near the bunkhouse, and a big bay horse thundered up to the bunkhouse door; a man leaped from his back and ran, with whizzing spurs, toward the waiting group.

"Where's Link?" he demanded breathlessly.

"It's Val Davis!" exclaimed Carter, as the man came within the glare of light from the doorway.

"Rushed, eh?" laughed Morgan, sarcastically.

"Rushed — yes!" snapped Val Davis. "Where's Link? Damn you — where is he?"

"He's in the house," answered Kinney.

"You guys get ready to jump!" Davis yelled back as he ran toward the house. "It's what you've been waiting for — gold dust on the stage, headin' east!"

Davis vanished into the darkness toward the ranch-house; while the other men, after one swift glance at one another, ran to the lean-to adjoining the stable to get their saddles.

A yell into the door of the bunkhouse brought other men out — and these, too, ran for their saddles.

At the ranchhouse Link Compton was opening the door of his office upon Val Davis.

Davis grinned excitedly as Compton opened the door for him. He closed the door, and stood with his back to it, while Compton, intensely interested, waited for him to get his breath.

"Well," Compton said, impatiently, after a short interval, "what's up?"

"Another shipment — east!" gasped Davis. "Twenty thousand!"

The expression of Compton's face changed; it became designing, triumphant, full of greed.

"The eleven o'clock?"

"You're shoutin'."

Compton looked at his watch. "We've got two hours," he said grinning. "Plenty of time. We'll stop her on Red Butte slope." He began to change his clothing, donning overalls, chaps, spurs, woolen shirt. From a closet he drew a black mask and a big neckerchief.

While he dressed Davis talked rapidly:

"I've put the boys wise — they're jumpin'," he grinned. "You remember me tellin' you about Moggs askin' Rand to head the new vigilance committee? Well, he's headin' it — on Moggs' say-so. Moggs didn't have time to go

through with it before this news of the gold shipment come in."

Davis grinned wickedly with venomous satire.

"Moggs has a lot of confidence in Rand. I'm supposed to be ridin' to the Three Bar right now, to tell Rand to take a bunch of his guys an' escort the stage from the lower Canadian through town, to Red Rock mesa. Rand an' his outfit would be hittin' that trail if I'd have gone direct there."

Tightening his belt, Compton's eyes gleamed.

"So Moggs don't trust me any more," he said. "On the next trip to town one of you guys salivate Carlson—the damned meddler!" he added vindictively. He laughed harshly, and in the gleam of his eyes appeared the dawning of a crafty thought.

"So Moggs is sending for Rand, eh?" He stood motionless, looking at Davis; and the cunning deepened in his eyes.

"How steady have you looked at Rand's horse, Midnight?" he inquired of Davis.

"A heap steady."

"He ain't all black. What's his markings?"

"White," replied Davis; "a long oval on his left foreleg above the knee, an' a spot as big as your hand on his right hip. That's all. What in hell you gettin' at?"

Compton laughed. A few minutes later, followed by

Davis, he ran down to the bunkhouse, where a number of his men were congregated. He spoke rapidly to Morgan, and that individual chuckled with glee.

Then, with the men clustered around them, Morgan and Compton performed some mysterious labor with Morgan's black horse. When that labor was completed the men, Compton leading, riding Morgan's black, rode southward rapidly into the white glare of an early moon that was just lifting its rim above the peaks of a mountain range.

CHAPTER XXVIII

UNMASKED

WHEN Link Compton left the Bar S late in the afternoon, after spending several hours riding with Eleanor Seddon, the girl sat on the threshold of the rear doorway of the ranchhouse, watching him until he struck the edge of the long slope that led into the basin.

Compton had been very gallant that day, and Eleanor felt the lure of him more than ever. There had been a moment that afternoon — when he had assisted her to dismount in a shaded section of the river trail — when physical contact with the man had sent a queer thrill over the girl.

It was the sex call, she knew; and afterward the recollection of the incident had disgusted her; she had felt the shame of reaction over the emotion. But, also, she realized the danger that confronted her. And so, reflecting over the incident now, she decided that hereafter she would not go riding with Compton.

For she could not bring herself to like the man. She was aware of his magnetism, but she did not like the bold confidence of his eyes when he looked at her; and she saw something hard and cruel and vindictive in him at times.

She could not help contrasting him with Rand. For, despite all she had heard of Rand, she had been impressed with him, and her chief emotion when thinking of him was that of regret that she could no longer trust or respect him.

She sighed and got up, walking into the house.

The Mexican woman smiled at her as she passed through the kitchen, and Eleanor spoke kindly to her, at which the woman nodded toward the open doorway, in the direction Compton had taken when leaving the ranch-house. The woman grinned with subtle deprecation.

"Theeze man, Compton, he's no good for lady," she said. "Too — what you call — fresh! He's too fresh. Missus no — what you say — hook up to him, huh? Rand — he's nize man — beeg, grand, straight."

"What do you know about Rand?"

The girl resented the woman's comments, but an overwhelming desire to hear something that would promise a slight hope for vindication fought the resentment, and she seized the woman by an arm — the firm grip bringing a knowing smile to the other's face.

"Rand's nize man," said the woman. "Ver' nize. He's take Millie Crofton's boy to bring heem home to the Three Bar to raise heem. Rand — he's like to love — he's hongry for love — for somet'ing to love. An' he bring Millie's boy home — to love heem."

"Millie Crofton's boy!" exclaimed Eleanor breathlessly. "Why, who is Millie Crofton?"

"Millie? She's no here any more, missus. She's die —two, t'ree, four years ago, mebbe. She's dance-hall girl in Gilt Edge. She's mudder of what you call— Bud—theeze boy Rand take home."

"How do you know?" The girl was pale and rigid, and her eyes were glowing with a light that made the Mexican woman smile broadly, with cunning.

"No mooch people know that, eh?" she said. "You t'ink Rand Bud's father? Somebody lie to you, eh? Mebbe that girl who come here the other night, eh?"

"Yes—yes!" gasped Eleanor. Both her hands were gripping the woman's shoulders now; and she shook the other savagely for digressing.

"How do *you* know? Tell me!" she demanded; "tell me—instantly!"

"I see somet'ing," grinned the woman; "an' I know plenty. When Millie Crofton get seek one day she send man over here. Your father gone—to Frisco. Theeze man take me to Gilt Edge, where Millie Crofton seek. An' Millie say to me——"

Here the woman whispered. And when she concluded Eleanor's face was crimson, and the light in her eyes was so eloquent that the woman, observing it, remarked gleefully:

"Rand—he's nize man, after all, eh?"

But Eleanor did not answer. She fled to her room, and there, on a chair, she sat with clasped hands, looking out of a window toward the Three Bar, the shadows of twilight, slowly dimming the river trail, seeming much like the coming of the dawn to her.

For tomorrow, very early in the morning, she would ride the river trail—to Rand and to Bud.

And she would never see Link Compton any more; she would never look at him again. She felt that, somehow, Compton was concerned in all this; that neither he nor her father had told her the truth—and she meant to *have* the truth. She would go tomorrow to Rand and speak plainly to him; no emotion of false modesty would deter her. And she would *make* him tell her what was between him and her father, for she knew now that there was something.

For though Seddon had not directly accused Rand of the parentage of Bud, he had intimated as much; and he had shown in many ways that he did not like Rand.

Later, she again questioned the Mexican woman, discovering that Millie Crofton had not divulged the secret that had agitated the section. But this much, however, she had learned—that Lucia Morell had lied, and that her father and Compton had seemed to align themselves with the girl.

Seething with the emotions that had gripped her, Eleanor found that the ranchhouse irritated her. She must get outside, into the big, open country, where she could breathe freely, and where she would have room to exult in the knowledge that had come to her.

Mounting Silver, she sent him on a rapid gallop down the river trail. Almost, when she had ridden a few miles, she was tempted to go at once to the Three Bar to have that talk with Rand. But she decided to wait until morning. For she wanted to think much before she faced Rand.

Darkness had enveloped the plains when she wheeled Silver and sent him scampering over the back trail.

When she neared the Bar S ranchhouse, she veered and passed to one side of it, riding westward, toward the Las Vegas trail.

At nine o'clock, after twilight had yielded to darkness —she found herself seated upon a huge, flat rock on the crest of a small hill. The glare of an early moon, swimming in a star-dotted azure sky, was in her eyes, and she turned her back to it, gazing at the plains, suffused with a soft, golden light.

For a long time, watching the plains, noting the shadows in the depressions, and the luminous crests of rises that were bathed in the moonlight, she reflected that many times in the years before she had left home to go to

Denver, she had journeyed to this very hill. The splendid isolation of the place had always enthralled her. And tonight it was a place that satisfied her mood.

The hill was small and its top was flat, and she was screened from sight by a thick, tall tangle of nondescript trees and bushes. Below her, where she had left Silver, was a shallow arroyo. The arroyo quite concealed Silver, however, and the animal, contented to rest after the long gallop, was browsing the grass and the tops of the weeds in the arroyo bottom, seemingly indifferent concerning the length of its rider's stay on the hilltop.

The eastern side of the hill, up which the girl had climbed, was a gentle slope; but the western side dropped sheer, perhaps twenty feet, to the deep, light sand on the plains.

The hill, Eleanor had always thought, had formed part of a ridge. A cloud-burst or other action of the elements, had made a huge gash in it, forming a "draw," in the vernacular of the country. Time and the action of the wind had almost obliterated the other section of the ridge, so that the girl had an unobstructed view of the Las Vegas trail and the frowning, red buttes that fringed the narrow bridle path.

The buttes extended far. In daylight they were rugged, dotted with huge, red rocks; and they held no beauty for the girl. But at night they loomed like solemn sentinels of

the land, seeming to bar from her comprehension the mystery of the great desert beyond them.

Scanning the northern limits of the buttes, Eleanor sighed. She had ridden far and she was tired. And she got up, intending to descend the hill to Silver, when she saw, far out on the plains, northward, a number of horsemen sweeping swiftly toward her.

She sat down again, experiencing a sudden tremor of disquiet. Instantly her thoughts leaped to the stories of rustlers told by her father, and she shrank down upon the rock, determined to delay her departure until the men passed.

The men were still a great distance away, but she knew that if she tried to leave the hill now they would see her, for though the distance to them was great, she could see them plainly enough. And so she waited.

But little time elapsed, though, until she could see them more plainly. They were heading in a southwesterly direction, and at first the girl thought they intended to pass the end of the red buttes and enter the desert. But when they reached the buttes, they swerved and came swiftly down the trail toward the hill from which she watched.

She held her breath in fear that they would ride straight upon her, and it was with vast relief that she saw them halt on the trail nearly opposite her.

And at that instant she divined what they had come
r. They intended to rob the stage.

Her father had informed her regarding the time of
e arrival in Ocate of this stage; she remembered that
had complained that the stage company had "no busi-
ss" trying to "make" Ocate at that unearthly hour.
robbers insisted on holding up the stage, the company
ght to make them do it in the daylight, Seddon had
clared.

Eleanor was intensely interested, even though a vicious
sentment filled her — a resentment mingled with the
ar of discovery.

She watched the men; saw them separate, some of them
ling through a break in the butte, others dismounting
d leading their horses into a deep, brush-fringed gully
at skirted the trail. In another instant they were in-
ible.

There were ten men; Eleanor counted them as they
ught the concealment the place afforded. But she was
longer interested in their actions — that is, in the move-
nts, of nine of them. For she singled out one —
parently the leader — who rode a big, black horse. And
the clear moonlight she had recognized the horse. It
s Midnight — she could tell that from his peculiar
rkings, the white oval on his left foreleg and the white
t on his right hip. No two horses could ever be

marked exactly the same way; and so the girl groane and buried her face in her hands.

For she knew now that what her father had said abou Rand was true—he was the outlaw who had been rob bing the stage. For a venomous moment the girl hope the men on the stage would kill him for deceiving he and in the next she was craning her neck for a better viev

For far up the trail she saw the stage coming, windin its way toward her, toward the point where the robbe were lying in wait.

The girl had a mad impulse to shout to the driver whe the stage came within sound of her voice, but she did n yield to it, divining that a warning would not avert th impending meeting—that if she shouted there might l bloodshed. Breathing fast, leaning forward and partin the bushes that she might get a better view, she waite

It was not for long. The stage came rolling down little slope toward the waiting men, struck a level, a began to ascend a slight rise. So near was the girl th she could hear the creaking of the harness leather on t horses, could hear the muffled rattling of the whee Above those sounds rose the voice of the driver, talkii loudly to a passenger beside him on the box.

The girl could not help drawing a mental comparis of this peaceful scene and the one that would instan follow it—if the occupants of the stage resisted.

What happened within the next few minutes was so odd that the girl entirely forgot she should be concealing herself; she stood up and watched, her eyes bright, her lips parted.

She heard the sharp challenge from the road agents; she heard the shriek of the brakes as the driver jammed them on, she saw the driver and the man on the box beside him raise their hands and clamber down.

Then the door of the coach opened and other men emerged, their hands also in the air. They were ranged beside the stage by some of the robbers, who had emerged from their concealment when their leader had uttered his challenge — and another robber was searching them.

The rider of the big, black horse did nothing. He sat, a menacing figure, in the saddle, a gleaming six-shooter in hand, the black horse prancing and turning from side to side, forcing his rider constantly to twist in the saddle to keep his weapon trained on the driver.

One of the robbers cut the traces, freeing the leaders — and the animals unconcernedly moved up the trail a little distance and began to nibble the trail grass.

Another robber opened the "boot" and threw down a heavy box, which fell with a dull thud into the sand of the trail. The robber carried the box a little distance, and with an ax, that he also took from the stage, began to smash the lock of the treasure box. He worked viciously,

and an instant later the girl saw him taking something from the box.

Then the scene changed swiftly. At a word from the leader the robber band was on the move once more. They quickly mounted their horses — some of them reappearing from the cleft in the butte — and with a concerted movement they all rode swiftly toward the hill upon which the girl stood.

She noted the movement in time and crouched down, so that the men could not see her, and she was hoping they would ride past her concealment when she saw them halt, not more than twenty feet from the mouth of the draw. Their leader, slightly behind them, joined the others as they halted.

They wore masks — all of them, and the girl's heart was full of savage indignation as she watched the leader.

That was Midnight, she told herself; she would know the horse at sight, anywhere. And his rider was Rand — she would have sworn to that, too. She was on the verge of calling to him, to tell him in no uncertain words what she thought of him for committing this outrage, when he laughed, lowly, in answer to a question, put to him gruffly by one of his men:

"What in hell you goin' this way for?"

"We're heading straight toward the Three Bar!" said the rider of the black horse. "Those yaps will see us, and

my vigilance committee will be hanging Rand in the morning!"

Eleanor knew, then, why the men had halted. They thought, possibly, that their leader should have gone in another direction, and they had waited to satisfy themselves regarding that point.

Another thing the girl knew. She knew that the rider of the black horse was not Rand, but Compton. For she recognized his voice. And as the men spurred their horses past the hill, she got a distinct view of Compton's face as he removed the mask and rode away with the others, a huge grin on his lips.

Eleanor waited for a time — until she saw the horsemen vanish into the hazy distance. Long before they disappeared the stage rolled onward toward Ocate; and the girl descended the hill, mounted Silver, and sent him homeward.

She was determined to stop at the Bar S only an instant, to see if her father had come in, and then she was going to ride to the Three Bar, to warn Rand of the evil that Compton had set in motion against him.

And as she rode there was a glad song in her heart; for she had misjudged a man, and she was going to him to tell him that he was greater than even she had dreamed — in the time when her dreams had been sweetest — and that she would never again doubt him.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE TRAP

COMPTON and his men fled eastward, straight toward the Three Bar, until they could no longer be seen by the occupants of the stage; then they veered northeastward, heading toward the Two Link.

Long before they were out of sight from the stage Compton joined Val Davis near the head of the group of running horses. Davis and Compton rode side by side for a mile or two, Compton talking fast to Davis; and when the group veered and went northeastward, Davis left them and sent his horse clattering along the rim of the big basin.

It was not long before Davis came in sight of the Three Bar ranchhouse. Halting his horse at the far corner of the pasture fence, Davis dismounted. He took from a saddle pocket a small canvas bag that Compton had given him during the ride toward the Three Bar, and stuck it in a hip pocket. Then, grinning, he dropped to the feathery dust that covered the section, rolling over and over until the dust covered him. Then he climbed on his horse and rode furiously toward the Three Bar ranchhouse.

The house was dark when Davis dismounted at a side

loor, but Davis made as much noise as possible — stamping heavily on the small stoop he was compelled to cross, nd hammering loudly upon the door.

He shouted two or three times when he heard someone noving about inside the house; and when Rand opened he door and stood back in the darkness of the interior, a ix-shooter in hand, he exclaimed gruffly at sight of the lust-covered figure that greeted him.

"What you wantin'?" he demanded.

"I'm Val Davis!" declared the other, feigning intense xcitement. "Lord — let me come in an' set down — I'm ure tuckered!"

Rand strode to a table and lighted a kerosene lamp. Both men stood blinking in the glare of light; and Davis aw he was in Rand's office. He dropped into a convenient hair — close to Rand's desk — and stretched out, flinging is arms wide, looking at Rand with tired eyes, his mouth pen.

"What's up?" demanded Rand. He had drawn on his rousers when he had got up to investigate the disturbnce made by Davis — he was barefooted, his hair disveled; and with the gun in hand he made a picture which vould have awed Davis had he come with open hostility.

The light nightshirt worn by Rand was open at the hroat, exposing the swell of his neck almost to the houlders and a portion of his chest. Davis could see the

rippling muscles — the visible signs of physical strength, and there was a measure of admiration mingled with his awe.

But Davis' mind was full of craft. He feigned breathlessness, exhaustion; and he gasped at Rand:

"I'll tell you — in a minute. Get me a drink — quick! I'll sure go under in a jiffy!"

Rand laid his gun on the desk and went into another room — Davis could hear him talking to someone, saying there was nothing wrong — that a man had come from town to see him.

Rand had not more than left the room in which Davis sat before Davis' exhaustion departed. Swiftly he pulled out a drawer of the desk, dropped into it the canvas bag he had transferred previously from the saddle pocket to the pocket of his trousers, together with a black mask and a large red neckerchief. Then he closed the drawer, and when Rand reappeared, bearing a bottle and a glass, Davis was sitting lax in the chair, breathing heavily.

"Now," said Rand, after Davis had emptied a glass that Rand filled for him.

"Moggs sent me here — right after nine o'clock — when we got word — to tell you that he wanted you to get your boys together to escort the stage into town. There was twenty thousand on her. I was comin' — hell-bent — when my cayuse fell an' throwed me. It was almost

eleven when I come to — lyin' flat on my back, lookin' at the moon. I wasn't more'n halfway here, an' I knowed it wasn't no use to try to get you in time, an' so I hit the breeze to Red Butte slope to kind of see if things went all right.

"When I got to Red Butte slope it had happened. The stage was headin' toward town, crippled; an' a gang of guys was ridin' south. I reckon, if you could get your men together, you'd be able to round them robbers up. Lord! Moggs will salivate me for bunglin' this job."

"South — you say?" demanded Rand. It was his first job as chief of the vigilantes — his first opportunity to demonstrate that the trust reposed in him was not misplaced. Also, it would give him an opportunity to work off some of that surplus energy which for days had sought an outlet. It would give him something tangible upon which to vent the cold fury which — since Lucia Morell's visit — had gnawed at him, filling him with a bitter malignance.

He was moving when he spoke to Davis; and it seemed only an instant to the latter from the time Rand vanished into the darkness of another room until he reappeared, fully dressed, buckling on his cartridge belt. Jamming into one of his holsters the pistol he had laid upon the desk, he blew out the light and, with Davis following, went to the corral to rope Midnight.

Later, riding into the distance toward Ocate, Davis brought his horse to a halt. Rand, observing Davis stop, pulled Midnight down.

"I'm goin' back to town, to tell Moggs what's happened," Davis said. "Them guys went straight into the desert, passin' the red buttes. It's likely they headed for Las Vegas. How many of the boys you takin'?"

"There's half a dozen workin' the far end of the big basin," said Rand; "I'll take them. Larry Redfern an' his bunch are at the other end — it's too far now to bother. I'll play her with six."

Midnight was plunging away with Rand's last words, and as Davis rode toward town he watched the black horse and rider vanish down the long slope of the basin. Davis grinned derisively as he rode, muttering:

"He bit — hard!"

CHAPTER XXX

CARRYING THE NEWS

THE stage crept into Ocate, the traces lashed together with some wire that the driver, Ben Toban, had produced from the box; and when it drew up in front of the office of the express company, Moggs was on the sidewalk, standing in the glare of light from the open doorway, waiting.

He ran forward when Toban clambered down, listening, his jaws grimly set, to the verbal disgust that flowed from Toban's lips. Disregarding the babble of the passengers, who were grouped on the sidewalk near the stage, gesticulating and bemoaning the loss of their valuables, Toban carried the broken treasure box into the office and set it heavily down on a table. Then he looked at Moggs, who had followed him inside.

Toban's eyes were gleaming with knowledge and venom —which Moggs saw.

"The damned brazen buzzard!" blurted Toban. "The mis'able whelp! I'd know him anywhere. I always did mistrust that guy!"

"Who?" demanded Moggs.

"Rand!" bellowed Toban—"Beau Rand! He's the

guy! Git your vigilantes together an' go after him. I'd know that Midnight horse anywheres. They headed straight for the Three Bar, an' if you an' your vigilantes don't string that guy up before mornin', you ain't no good — that's what!"

Moggs gripped the table edge and looked at Toban, his eyes blazing with mingled astonishment and wrath.

"You sure, Toban?" he said hoarsely; "there mustn't be any mistake about this!"

"Sure as shootin'!" declared the driver. "I was standin' not more'n ten feet from him, an' I seen the markin's of that Midnight horse. I've noticed them markin's particular — a white oval on the left foreleg an' a white blotch on the right hip. Sure? Oh, hell!"

Moggs grinned with mirthless irony — for at this minute he reflected upon how he had trusted Rand — and how he had insisted that Rand should accept the leadership of the vigilantes. Leaving Toban in the office, Moggs ran from building to building, searching for those of the vigilance committee upon whom he could depend.

Long before he could assemble them, Val Davis rode into town and dropped from his horse in front of the office. There, in the midst of his activities, Moggs came upon him and dragged him into the office.

"What's happened to you?" demanded Moggs, noting the dust on Davis' clothing.

"I started for the Three Bar — as you told me," said Davis, affecting great excitement. "About halfway there my horse throwed me. I must have been knocked out, for when I come to it was about eleven — time for the stage. It was too late to do anything about the stage — an' I thought you was mighty scary without cause — an' so I hit the breeze to the Three Bar, anyway, figurin' that if anything had happened you would want Rand to be on the job. An' so I went to the Three Bar. I don't remember that I was thinkin' anyways clear at all, anyway.

"When I got to the Three Bar there was a bunch of horses there — an' Rand. Rand took me into his office. He was all dusty — like he'd rode hard. It seemed mighty suspicious that him an' his men was gallivantin' around the country that late; and when Rand left the office for a minute to go outside, I nosed around a little. An' in a drawer of his desk — which was open a little — I saw a bag of dust an' a black mask. The bag was one of them little canvas things that the company uses for all its dust — with the company's name on it in black letters."

Toban, standing near, laughed harshly.

"I reckon that's proof!" he said triumphantly.

"You don't mean that the stage was held up?" demanded Davis sharply, feigning surprise. And then, with the eyes of Toban and Moggs, and some members of the vigilance committee upon him, Davis seemed to

realize there was some connection between what he had said he had seen at the Three Bar and the robbery of the stage.

"So that's it;" he said; "that's how Rand come to have the bag of dust an' the mask. There might have been more bags — if I had kept on lookin'.

"I didn't stay there long," Davis continued; "Rand didn't seem to want me. I started back. But it all seemed mighty suspicious to me, an' when I got to a ridge about two miles from the Three Bar I stopped an' watched. An' I hadn't been gone long when the Three Bar bunch heads out, ridin' hard toward the big basin.

"Rand was with them — ridin' the Midnight horse. He went into the basin with the rest. An' they stopped, but Rand kept on goin' — headin' toward the Las Vegas trail."

"That's all," said Moggs grimly. "We'll get goin'. But we'll ride to the Three Bar first, to see what we can find in Rand's desk."

Within half an hour, headed by Moggs, the members of the vigilance committee rode out of town into the first gray light of the dawn which seemed to appear above the horizon far beyond the spot where the buildings of the Three Bar, deserted by their owner, snuggled the peaceful banks of a river.

CHAPTER XXXI

A NEW FOE

WHEN Eleanor Seddon came in sight of the Bar S ranchhouse she saw a light shining through one of the kitchen windows. She experienced a thrill of satisfaction, for she divined that her father had come in. The Mexican woman, she knew, always retired early, and so the light in the kitchen could mean only one thing — that Seddon had come in and was taking a midnight lunch.

She was riding down the corral fence near the bunkhouse when she saw the light vanish, and she decided that her father had finished his meal and was going to bed.

She slid off Silver at the corral gate, trailing the reins over his head, and hurried toward the house — for she wanted to tell her father where she was going, so that he would not worry about her.

She was breathing fast from the wild ride from the Red Buttes, and she took no note of anything as she crossed the ranchhouse yard, except to notice that her father had not put his horse away — the animal was standing near the stable door, the reins trailed over his head.

The side door, opening into her father's office, was ajar, and she entered, searching for the lamp that was usually

on the desk. She found it after a while, and while lighting it, called loudly for her father, thinking that if he had not yet gone upstairs she would save time by talking to him here.

But no reply reached her ears, and she took up the lamp, lighting her way as she walked through the dining-room toward the sitting-room, which opened upon the stairs leading to the second floor.

At the foot of the stairs she called again. Receiving no answer, she started to climb the stairs, and she had reached the fourth or fifth step when she heard a muffled groan, seeming to come from the kitchen.

Startled, she retraced her steps, crossed the sitting-room, and walked into the kitchen, expecting to see her father there.

What she did see made the lamp waver in her hands until the chimney rocked wildly back and forth — the blaze fluttering and reaching out a licking tongue that almost singed her hair.

The Mexican woman was lying on the floor near the kitchen table, face down.

She seemed to have been hurt, and Eleanor set the lamp on the kitchen table and leaned over the woman, deeply concerned. Kneeling, she called softly to the woman, and when she heard a smothered sound issuing from the woman's mouth, she seized her head and turned it side-

se, to see a handkerchief bound tightly over her lips, d securely knotted at the back of her head.

Amazed, she started back, rising to her feet, a pre- ntiment of evil chilling her blood. As she got to her et she saw what she had not seen before — the woman's ms, tied tightly behind her. The same glance gave her glimpse of the woman's legs, bound at the ankles.

Eleanor was in the grip of a mighty paralysis, now. For e presentiment of evil had grown beyond that stage; in r heart was a conviction of danger — a conviction that me evil was in the house with her — perhaps in the same om.

Holding her breath, forcing her quivering muscles to ercise their functions, she slowly turned to face the door rough which she had come. She caught her breath with gasp and fell back two or three steps, her eyes bulging th terror. For in the open doorway at which she was oking was a big, villainous-looking, swarthy-faced man, inning at her.

She knew, now, why the kitchen light had been blown t; the man had heard her coming, and had prepared s surprise for her. And in this instant she blamed rself for not looking closer at the horse she had seen nding at the stable door.

But these were subconscious thoughts. They flitted rough her brain while she was moving away from the

man — backing toward the other side of the kitchen tab so that it would be between them should the man attemp to advance toward her.

He noted the movement, and his grin broadened.

"Don't be scare', *señorita,*" he said, in a guttura maudlin voice; and her pulses leaped in terror, for she sa that the man was drunk, and that repulsive passion wa lying naked in his eyes.

He said no other word — he needed to say none to co vince her of his intentions. For he began to move towar her, crouching a little, staggering and swaying as h crossed the floor.

She had never seen the man before; she was sure h did not work for her father — for at one time or anoth she had seen all the Bar S men. She was convinced th he was a wanderer, who had stopped at the ranchhou accidentally — or that he was a friend of the Mexica woman, visiting her and drinking more than was goo for him.

He stopped her conjecturing and speculation as h advanced, slipping around the table in order to grasp he

"Me frien' of dance-hall woman — Lucia," he sai smirking odiously. "Theeze Lucia she say you ver' ni girl — you mak' love to me. She say nobody here — yo no care. We alone. We love — eh?"

Retreating from his advance, she gained the side of t

table toward the door through which she had entered; and with a quick leap she left the table and ran toward the door. She heard him stumble as he reached for her — his hand almost grasping the hem of her riding skirt.

That stumble saved her, for she was only a step in advance of him when she went out of the door. She would have gone outside to get on her horse and ride away if she had any hope of success. But he was too close to her, and a center table intervened. So she chose her only chance, and when she reached the door leading to the second floor she darted through it, trying to slam it behind her.

She almost succeeded. But when she felt one of his arms sticking through between the jamb and the door she knew she had not succeeded, and that his superior strength would soon remove that barrier.

Shoving viciously on the door, she heard him snarl with pain; and taking advantage of the slight inaction on his part, she turned and fled up the stairs. Reaching her room, she closed the door, slid the fastenings into place — thanking God meanwhile that she had insisted upon her father putting strong ones upon it.

The reaction came now, and she stood with her back to the door, her knees shaking, every muscle and nerve in her body quivering from terror and exhaustion.

She heard the man clamber up the stairs; she listened to his step as he searched the other rooms; she shrank and

cringed when she heard him halt in front of her door. She saw the door give a little as he leaned against it; and she could hear his deep, heavy breathing.

She stood there for, it seemed, many hours, listening to him, making no sound as he tried to coax her to open the door. He told her he had been joking; that he meant her no harm; that all he wanted was food, and then he would go away.

And at last, when he discovered that cajolery would not bring him success, he grew violent—kicking the door, lunging against it, battering it with a chair.

She did not know how long she stood there, dreading, the cold, clammy sweat of terror upon her. But she knew that she could not stand the strain very much longer. Soon, if the man persisted, he would burst the door in.

Looking out of a window in the room some time later, she saw the gray dawn beginning to streak the sky, and she hoped that with the dawn would come assistance. She even hoped that Compton, despite the thing he had done at the Red Buttes, would visit her. Or that her father would come—anybody!

The man had been quiet for a few minutes; now she heard him muttering that he would go down and get an ax; and then——

His threat froze her, and she leaned weakly against the door, listening as the man went down the stairs.

For a brief instant she meditated, almost persuaded to yield to a wild impulse to open the door and try to escape to her horse. But she reflected that perhaps this was a ruse — and she did not yield to the impulse. And then, after a little, she heard a step on the stairs again, and the man's muttering as he stood before the door.

She heard him grunt as he swung the ax — she saw the blade sink through the wood, showing its flashing edge near her face.

She screamed, then. But the man laughed mockingly and swung the ax again; and she cringed back from the door, watching as the man slowly demolished it.

Larry Redfern, riding herd in the big basin, had seen many riders on the rim of the slope during the interval between moonrise and midnight.

First there had been ten or more — who had gone northward like the wind; then he had seen two others — one of whom had seemed to glide down the far side of the basin toward its most southerly end. That one had parted with his companion on the rim of the basin about two miles from where Larry had been riding, and had fled out of sight toward Ocate.

Larry had thought it strange that so many riders should be abroad at that hour of the night, but he reflected that no one bothered the cattle it was not his affair.

Still, he was thinking of the riders as he rode through the basin; and when he saw, far over toward the southerly side of the basin, a dark blot moving against the luminous horizon, he decided to investigate.

Hitting his horse a slap, he headed toward the blot; and when he saw that it continued to move toward him, he sent his horse into an arroyo where, in the shadows, he would not be seen by the rider.

Farther on, Larry was forced to ascend the slope of the arroyo; but he did not expose himself to view, seeking the sheltering shadows of some small fir-balsams that grew along the edge of a barranca.

The rider continued to approach, and Larry, growing intensely curious, at last urged his horse straight for the rider.

They met near the bottom of the southern slope, and when Larry got over his surprise he found himself listening intently.

For the rider was a woman—the Mexican woman employed by Amos Seddon as his housekeeper. She told a tale in her guttural jargon that made Larry's face turn dead white as he listened.

"Theeze man come," the woman said; "he's tell me he's come to love Miz' Seddon. He's say Lucia Morel send him—she say Miz' Seddon make love plenty. He' knock me down an' tie me, an' put rag on my mouth whe

I — what you call — kick. Then he's ron after Miz' Seddon. She's go upstairs an' lock herself in her room — an' he's try to bust the door down. I git loose an' come — hunt for somebuddy to help."

Larry did not hear any other words the Mexican woman said. Nor did he wait to ride to some of the other men he knew were in the basin. Before the Mexican woman had entirely finished her story, Larry's horse was on the run, and he went up the long slope with a speed that made the Mexican woman, following slowly after him, catch her breath in astonishment.

It was a long ride up the slope, and Larry's horse was almost winded when he reached the crest. And during the short interval when Larry stopped to breathe the animal, he intently examined the six-shooter at his hip.

Then he went on again, urging the horse with quirt and spur; and when he came within sight of the ranchhouse, the horse, now thoroughly warmed to his work, was covering ground with a speed that filled Larry with a grim exultation.

For the first time in his life Larry did not waste time being particular about trailing the reins over the animal's head. He gave them a fling, and was out of the saddle on the instant, running toward the ranchhouse, gun in hand.

As he neared the side door he heard a scream — a

woman's scream, shrill with a frenzied terror. He wen through the side door with a bound. In another instan he was running lightly through the lower rooms, search ing them. Finding nothing, he started for the stairs, an when at the foot of them he heard another scream, thi time carrying a despairing note.

In the next instant Larry was at the top of the stairs looking down the hall, his eyes ablaze.

He saw a big man smashing down a door with an ax The door was almost down, and a succession of scream issued from the other side of it.

At almost the instant Larry saw the man, the ma turned and saw Larry. He reached for the pistol at hi hip. Grinning derisively, Larry shot him — twice — sending the bullets with a venom that told of his deadl intentions.

The man made no sound — sagging forward, clutchin at his chest, his face malignant with hate.

And then there was a short silence, during which Larr stepped over the man's body and peered through the sha tered door into the room at a white-faced girl who fainte when she heard his:

"That locoed son-of-a-gun sure must have scared yo some — didn't he, ma'am?"

CHAPTER XXXII

LUCIA'S REVENGE

COMPTON did not ride far with the other members of his band. After Val Davis left them to ride to the Three Bar, Compton accompanied the others about a mile; then he brought them all to a halt with a short command.

"Kinney and Morgan and myself are going to town to see how this thing shapes up. The rest of you hit the breeze to the Two Link and cache that stuff. There'll be a big divvy when this blows over. Get going!"

As the other members of the band fled northward, Compton dismounted, and with some bunch grass he obliterated the white artificial marks he and Morgan had made on Morgan's black horse. During the process Morgan chuckled gleefully.

"That bit of whitewash will get Rand in a heap of trouble, looks like!" he said.

The three men mounted again, and began a leisurely ride to town. When they entered the street they saw the stage in front of the express company's office, the passengers clustered around it, talking excitedly.

Compton and the others dismounted in front of the Gilt

Edge, and hitched their horses to a rail. Grinning with satisfaction and interest, they walked down the street a little distance, until they were able to look into the lighted office of the express company across the street. Chuckling lowly, they saw Moggs and Toban inside — Toban making emphatic motions with his hands — Moggs listening to him, frowning.

Later, still standing in the shadows on the opposite side of the street, they saw Val Davis ride in and dismount in front of the office. They saw Moggs drag Davis inside and question him; and they gleefully noted the sincerity of Davis' manner.

"He's sure all there when it comes to spreadin' the soft-soap," said Morgan. "I wonder what old Moggs would say if he knowed Val had been foolin' him all this time?"

The three men were in the rear room of the Gilt Edge during the excitement which attended the efforts of Moggs to summon the members of his vigilance committee. They entered the room from an outside door, at the rear of the building, Labrue himself opening the door for them after getting a glimpse of Morgan's face at one of the side windows.

And in the rear room, the door opening into the dance-hall closed against any of the curious who might have wondered, Compton, Morgan, and Kinney played cards

and drank until Moggs and his vigilantes rode out of town.

Then Davis joined them, chuckling, and recounting to them the story of his personal experiences, not forgetting to tell them he had sent Rand "hittin' the Las Vegas trail —hard!"

Later, leaving the others in the rear room, Compton passed through the dance-hall to the barroom, where he drank at the bar with Labrue.

Compton had not emerged from the rear room until the discordant noise from the piano in the dance-hall ceased; and when he passed through the room it was deserted, the begrimed chimneys of the kerosene lamps casting a weak glare over the dirty floor, over the empty glasses and bottles strewn here and there; the card-tables, their tops thick with spilled liquors. The atmosphere of the room reeked with the odors of stale tobacco smoke and strong drink—lingering memories of the night's wild debauch.

Compton had been talking with Labrue for some time, until the gray dawn stole into the windows and imparted a ghastly, faded-out appearance to the interior of the building. Then, hearing a woman's voice issue from a rear room, Compton and Labrue both turned and faced in that direction.

"That's Lucia," grinned Labrue. "She's been hittin'

the booze pretty heavy tonight. First time I ever knew her to lose her head!"

A door opened as Labrue and Compton watched, and Lucia Morell stepped out. Her hair was in disorder—strands of it sticking out maudlinly beyond the mass that wreathed her head; her dark eyes were flashing with a wild and wanton light; and as she emerged from the room she staggered, flinging her arms wide against the door-jambs to steady herself.

"She's been entertaining a greaser—from down Lincoln way," laughed Labrue. "Manuel Correjo, the outlaw—tin-horn, rustler—anything," went on Labrue. "He hits town about twice a year. Until now, Lucia wouldn't even look at him. But when a woman gets one of those spells—" He paused, as though attempts at further expression were futile.

Lucia was not as drunk as she seemed. Since the departure of Correjo, some hours before, Lucia had been sitting at a table in the rear room, the door locked, sleeping, her head resting on the table.

When she saw Compton standing with Labrue at the bar, she laughed shrilly, with discordant venom.

"It's Link Compton!" she said. And she left the door and walked uncertainly forward until she stood within a few feet of the two men.

She did not look at Labrue; she watched Compton with

sneering, wanton eyes, which were blazing with contempt and hate.

"Bah!" she sneered, straightening as she faced Compton, her hands on her hips, her chin thrust belligerently forward. "You're bilked, Compton, do you know that? You can stand there and grin, thinking you are wise. But you're not wise.

"I've fixed you for treating me like a dog — and I've fixed Rand — for turning me down. Do you hear? I went to Rand and told him the truth. I double-crossed *you!* But Rand wouldn't have me. He told me he'd roast in hell before he'd ever look at me again! Ha, ha!

"He thinks Eleanor Seddon is pure and innocent; and you think she's pure and innocent. That's why you wanted her. Bah! You men make me sick!"

She laughed, and the sound of it brought a gleam of disgust into Labrue's eyes. He stepped to her side, took her by an arm, and shoved her roughly toward the dance-hall, from which ran the stairs to the second story.

"You're drunk," he said; "go to bed."

Labrue's arm was knocked away, and Compton stepped close to Lucia.

"This is my affair," Compton told Labrue gruffly. "She's said some things that I want explained." He leaned toward the woman; she should have been warned by the sinister gleam of his eyes as he grinned at her.

"How have you fixed me? What have you done?" he said contemptuously.

Lucia laughed, looking up into Compton's face, but not catching the queer, cold glare in his eyes.

"I've fixed her — for both of you; for you and Rand!" she jeered. "Do you know Correjo — that tin-horn oiler I was with tonight? Well, I sent him to the Bar S last night, long before midnight. I told him Eleanor Seddon had taken a shine to him, and that she had told me that the next time he struck town I should send him to her. And I sent him. I told him not to be afraid of her; I told him ——"

Labrue tried to grasp Compton's arm as he struck. He failed by a narrow margin, and was himself thrown to his knees by the shock of Lucia's body striking him as she fell.

Before Labrue could get to his feet, Compton had bounded to the rear room, yelling for Morgan and Kinney. And before Labrue could examine Lucia to see how badly she had been hurt, Compton, Morgan, and Kinney had burst out of the front door of the saloon and were riding furiously out of town toward the Bar S.

CHAPTER XXXIII

FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH

IT HAD taken Larry Redfern many minutes to restore Eleanor Seddon to consciousness, but he was finally rewarded by seeing her open her eyes and look at him in a dazed manner. He had carried her downstairs and laid her on a big couch in the sitting-room.

It was there she had opened her eyes to see Larry standing before her; and she sat up instantly, looking at him fearfully, as though she was not quite sure that he, too, was not of the type of man who had attacked her.

But something she saw in Larry's frank, honest eyes reassured her, and she smiled at him, a little wildly, shuddering at the recollection of what had happened.

"Where is he?" she began. "Did you——"

Larry grinned. "I reckon I did, ma'am. He won't go rampagin' around the country no more, botherin' women. I sure handed him plenty!"

"Who are you?" she asked. "And how did it happen that you — came — just in time?"

"I'm Larry Redfern, ma'am. I'm range boss for the Three Bar — Rand's ranch. I reckon you know him, ma'am," he grinned. "An' I was in the big basin when

this here greaser woman housekeeper of yours rides down an' tells me about what's happened."

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "You are Larry. I've heard Rand speak of you. You can help me. For I want to see him—to warn him—about something. I must see him!"

She got up and ran to the kitchen, where she got a towel and dried her face—for Larry had used much water in his efforts to restore her to consciousness.

"You can go with me," she told Larry, as she returned to the room. "You go out and get Silver—my horse—ready. Give him a drink—he's been without water since last night. Oh, do hurry, please! I'll be out in just a minute!"

Larry grinned and turned, walking toward the door. He had just reached it when Amos Seddon stepped on the threshold, his eyes alight with wonder.

The girl saw him as he stepped inside the room, and she ran to him and began to blurt out the story of the night's happenings.

Seddon's face paled at the grim news; and when she began to speak of Rand and the boy, Bud, he led her into his office and sat down in a chair, tenderly drawing her to him.

For he meant to tell her, to confess his misdeeds, and ask her forgiveness.

He had come into the ranchhouse for that purpose. The influence of Compton's smooth words had not endured. Conscience was at work on Seddon, and he knew he would never have any peace until he told Eleanor the truth.

"Ellie," he said, "The housekeeper told the truth—Rand's boy, Bud, is my boy. Rand knows it. I—wasn't man enough to——"

He paused, listening. And to the ears of both came the rushing beat of hoofs upon the hard sand of the dooryard.

Getting up and pushing Eleanor from him, Seddon looked out of the open door and saw Compton, Kinney, and Morgan just dismounting from their horses within fifty feet of the house.

Seddon stepped back from the door, his face white.

"Somethin's happened, Ellie," he said; "them men is in an awful hurry!"

Before Seddon could say more, the men were inside the office. Compton came first, and the others crowded in behind him.

Compton's breath was coming rapidly, for he and the men had had a hard ride, but there was a gleam of relief in his eyes when he saw Eleanor; and he stepped toward her, smiling.

"You escaped him, eh? Lucia Morell told me. God! how frightened I was. I kept seeing you fighting that damned outlaw—" He paused, noting the coldness of

her look — though he attributed it to shock. "He came didn't he?"

"Yes," she said evenly, "he came."

"Did he get away?" He stiffened and looked at Kinney and Morgan, ready to order them to search for Correjo should the girl reply affirmatively.

He started when the girl said slowly: "He is dead."

"Who —" he began, looking at Seddon, thinking Seddon had saved her.

The girl interrupted him, saying coldly:

"That isn't important," she said in a low, intense tone "*That* is over. It was very good of you to come here to see if I had been attacked, and to punish the man. But have you the manhood to ride to the Three Bar, to wait there until the vigilance committee, *your* vigilance committee — the one you spoke about last night over near the Red Buttes — comes to hang Rand? Have you the manhood to tell that committee that it was you, and not Rand who robbed the stage last night?"

Compton stiffened, his muscles twitching and his face turning crimson. For an instant he stood, looking hard at the girl; then his face paled, his eyes gleamed with a mocking light, and he leaned toward her.

"Where were you when I did that talking?"

"On the hill at the edge of the draw near the Red Buttes," she said. "I had ridden there, and I saw you

nd your men rob the stage. Then you rode to the base of ıe hill and told your men——"

Compton laughed, "So you heard that, eh?"

There had come a change in the man. The smooth landness of his manner—that he had always affected in er presence—had gone. His mouth was now cruel, the ps in a snarling pout; his eyes were savage, narrowing ith a cold malevolence that chilled the girl. While she tood watching him, fascinated by the change that had ome over him, he spoke again.

"So you heard that, eh?" he repeated. "You heard ıe say that I was going to blame Rand for robbing the tage; and Lucia Morell told you the truth about Rand's oy. By this time, I suppose, you are sure I've been trying o make a fool of you.

"Well, I have. I don't deny it. And I'm going to ontinue to make a fool of you. Understand that? No ne can prevent me. I want you, and I'm going to take ou. You belong to me!"

Stepping forward, he seized her, drawing her toward im and smothering her in his embrace, despite her strug- les, while he laughed aloud, full-throatedly, vibrantly, ıe sound moving the girl to a frenzy of terror.

"Daddy!" she called, her voice stifled by her nearness o Compton.

Seddon cursed hideously. Until now he had been

stunned by Compton's action; he had stood there, not understanding the significance of their words.

But he did understand the plea in Eleanor's voice; it was an appeal to the protective instinct in him.

Leaping, he struck at Compton, with a malignance that threw him entirely off balance when his fist missed its target. He crashed against Compton, striking the man with his shoulder, reeled, stumbled, and fell near the door.

The impact of Seddon's shoulder had sent Compton reeling, so that he was forced to release the girl to keep himself from falling.

He regained his balance, and wheeled, snarling, to face Seddon, who was scrambling to his feet, drunk with rage and resentment.

Seddon clawed at his holster while rising, and when he reached his feet the gun was in his hand. He stood, his legs sprawled, braced, his body in a crouch, his eyes wild with defiance and contempt.

"Damn your soul, Compton, this has gone far enough!" he shrieked. "I've stood for enough of your lies an' schemes. I'm through. This settles it! You get out of this house, an' stay out! If you ever stick your nose around here again, I'll kill you sure as hell!

"I'm through. I'm runnin' a new trail. I've told the girl about the boy — I've confessed to her. An' hereafter I'm runnin' straight. You an' your damned bunch of

outlaws are goin' it alone. I'm honest from now on—an' I stay honest! You get out an' leave me an' my girl. Ah!" he finished.

The muzzle of his weapon leaped upward, fire streaking from it with the movement. But just a pulse-beat in advance of the report of his pistol came another—Kinney's. Kinney had caught a certain significant gleam in Compton's eyes as for an instant they had met his, and he knew that the look, directed at him, could mean but one thing.

There was no Rand before Kinney now, to paralyze his muscles or to cloud his brain; and his bullet went true. Seddon's muscles did not even twitch after he struck the floor. He fell with an appearance of finality unmistakable.

The three men stood silent while Eleanor ran to the body, knelt beside it, and yielded to the hysteria that seized her. She got to her feet after an instant and ran at Kinney, screaming that he was a murderer; then, her mood changing, she faced Compton, and with bitter invective charged him with the murder. Then, observing that her words had no effect upon the sullen-faced group, she cried aloud, impotently, and fell upon her father's body, sobbing convulsively.

It was not a pleasant scene—even for the three men. They stood, watching the girl—Kinney's face wreathed

in a half-sneering surface grin, which went no deeper than the skin; Morgan watched palely, his eyes shifting, the muscles of his face twitching. Compton, his lips in a terrible pout, stood back, his face pallid, watching the girl.

Larry Redfern, watering Silver back of the stable, heard the shots. His first thought was that he had not killed the Mexican after all, and that the man had revived and had again attacked Eleanor.

Larry ran toward the house, drawing his gun. He had been on the far side of the stable when Compton and the others rode up, and he had not heard nor seen them. But as he ran toward the house he saw their horses near the door of the office. And when he got within several paces of the office door he heard Eleanor scream.

While Compton and the others were watching Eleanor Larry reached the open doorway. He was standing on the threshold when they saw him, his eyes blazing with wrath, the dark tube of his six-shooter menacing them.

For an instant there was no sound, except for Larry's heavy breathing and the convulsive sobbing of the girl on the floor.

Then Larry crouched; his eyes flaming, his muscles tensed.

"What you guys done?" he demanded.

Hearing his voice, Eleanor turned to look at him, exposing her father's face.

"Hell's fire!" snapped Larry; "it's Seddon! You skunks have killed him!"

Compton smiled mirthlessly. "It was an accident, Redfern," he said; "Kinney and Seddon were scuffling, and Kinney's gun went off."

"You lie!" screamed the girl, getting to her feet and facing Compton. "That man"—pointing to Kinney—"deliberately shot him—I saw it! It was murder—plain, cruel murder!"

Larry's face worked spasmodically. He hated Compton—for Compton would have killed him that day in the basin had he turned his back for an instant; and he knew Kinney as a merciless gunfighter who had come to the section for the deliberate purpose of killing Rand; he also knew Morgan as a mean, vitriolic-tempered trouble-hunter who, while not so bloodthirsty as Kinney, had killed many men. Also, Larry knew that Rand loved Eleanor Seddon, and that whatever he could do for the girl he would be doing for Rand.

He knew, too, that these men were tricky; that he must be careful how he moved, and that for not an instant must he permit his eyes to stray from them.

Already he saw Kinney watching him with a cold, alert, and speculating gaze; and he knew that if he took his gaze off the man for a second the other would draw the gun that he yearned to use.

Larry stepped into the room, moving lightly, his muscles tensed, ready for action, his eyes glittering.

He intended to get into a better position — where the men would be just a trifle farther from him, and not so nearly in line — so that one might not leap behind another and he be unable to shoot him. And he was moving according to his purpose when Eleanor, seemingly not realizing the danger, stepped toward him, holding out her hands to him in mute appeal.

"Get back!" he said gruffly, to her.

She turned — a trifle too late. For Morgan had leaped at Larry's words, straight toward Larry, and when Eleanor, tardily understanding Larry, moved sidewise, she stepped directly in front of Morgan, and Larry could not use his gun.

Larry swung swiftly in the opposite direction at the instant Compton leaped at him from the other side. There was no chance for either of the three men to use their guns, for Eleanor was too close to Larry.

Larry, however, used his. But it went off just as Compton's hand closed on Larry's wrist — the bullet going into the ceiling as Morgan, using the butt of his gun, smashed Larry on the head, sending him crashing to the floor in the center of the room.

When Larry regained consciousness he was lying where he had fallen — in the center of the room.

At first objects about him were strangely blurred, and Larry's head ached so that he did not attempt to look again. But he heard voices — Compton's and Eleanor's.

Compton's voice was mocking, triumphant.

"You'll go with me," he said; "to the Two Link. If you don't go of your own free will, I'll carry you. However it is to be done, you go. That's the only way I can keep you from talking about what you saw last night!"

Larry made a great effort, and opened his eyes again. This time he saw Compton and Eleanor. The other men were not in the room.

Compton had crowded Eleanor into a corner; he was holding her tightly against the wall, and the girl was moving her head from side to side — frenziedly — trying to keep Compton's lips from hers. For he held her arms at her sides, but he could not force her to keep her head motionless.

"Damn you!" he cursed, his voice thick with passion; "I'll kiss you before we leave this room!"

Larry reached for his gun — the holster was empty. The gun must have fallen from his hand when he had got the blow on the head.

Rand, Larry reflected, would not like Compton to kiss his girl; and it was with this odd thought in mind that Larry stealthily lifted his head to look for the weapon he had dropped. Loyalty to Rand was what was forcing

Larry to search for his gun — for every movement he made was torture; and several times as he turned his head to look for the weapon he came near to tumbling over, to yield to the terrible nausea that afflicted him.

Compton persisted, and Eleanor continued to resist. Larry did not know how long. He finally found the pistol, raised himself to a sitting posture and leveled the weapon at Compton. He thought he was holding it steadily, but instead it was waving in eccentric circles, and only occasionally was it directed at Compton.

"Compton!" called Larry.

At the sound of the voice Compton wheeled toward him.

However, he did not release Eleanor. For at the instant Compton wheeled, Larry was speaking again, drunkenly, to Eleanor, while he lurched weakly from side to side, almost falling with each movement.

"If you'll move a little, ma'am," he said; "I'll sure perforate that coyote that's got you penned up."

Compton did not move, then. He waited until the pistol in Larry's hand described a wide, eccentric circle. And when the pistol was marking the widest radius of the circle, Compton flashed around and drew his own gun.

Its roar mingled with the report of Larry's pistol — for Larry had noted the swift movement and had blindly pulled the trigger. Larry's bullet went wild, striking the

wall near Compton. Compton's aim, though, had been true.

Larry shivered, the gun dropped from his nerveless hand; he sighed, and lurched gently forward, falling on his face and turning slowly over on his back, where he lay, motionless, a dark stain appearing on the front of his shirt, near the heart.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A MAN IN A DOORWAY

IT HAD taken Rand some time to find his men in the basin; and it had taken much more time to get them out of the basin and upon the big level that stretched away toward the Red Buttes. It was in the hour of the early morning when darkness is deepest that Rand and the six Three Bar punchers struck the edge of the big level and, after halting to breathe their horses, sent them running westward. And the ghostly dawn had come when the horsemen reached the Red Buttes and dismounted, to try to pick up the trail of the stage robbers.

The story of the holdup was written in the deep dust that covered the ground in the vicinity of the trail. Darting here and there, Rand could see hoof tracks which told him that the robbers had come from the north; that they had separated when reaching the point where the robbery had occurred — some of them hiding in a break between the buttes; others concealing themselves in an arroyo beside the trail. Rand could even see where the passengers had stood — and other marks in the dust on the western side of the trail told him where Toban, the driver, had stood.

Rand followed the hoofprints to a sand draw east of the trail. There, he observed, the men had halted, for a few minutes only. Then, according to the tale written in the sand, they had fled northward.

Rand smiled grimly when he had read the signs thus far.

For Val Davis had told him the robbers had ridden southward. Therefore, Davis had lied!

Why?

Rand did not pause to conjecture over that. His shout brought the other men to his side; and by the time they reached him he was in the saddle himself.

"Davis has been romancin', boys!" he told the other men. "The robbers went north — most of them. There's one track leadin' east — direct. I'm goin' that way. You boys hit the breeze to town an' tell Moggs to give you more men. Then pick up the trail again. Town ain't much out of your way. Slope!"

Midnight was running hard by the time Rand gave his final order, with his rider leaning far over to trace the hoofprints that, deep in the light, feathery dust, led eastward over rise and depression, as straight as a horse could travel.

That the horse had been ridden by one of the stage robbers Rand had no doubt — for the animal had been traveling fast — Rand could tell that from the grouping

of the hoofprints, from their depth, and by the singular way the trailing dust had fallen after the horse had passed.

"Throwin' dust like a scared jack rabbit!" mused Rand.

His horse runnning, still heading eastward, a worried and perplexed frown began to gather on Rand's brow. The Bar S lay straight east. And the tracks led eastward. Could that mean that Seddon had been in the gang that had robbed the stage?

Rand did not want to believe that, and yet he kept Midnight going fast, for he was determined to run the rider down. If the rider were Seddon, so much the worse for him. If the rider was not Seddon, Rand would have a better chance to catch him — for Seddon would stop at the Bar S, and he would have had time to conceal all traces of his guilt. But another man — though he might stop at the Bar S, would have to go on again. And no matter how far the race, or how fast the pace, Rand had faith in Midnight's ability to win.

He was near the Bar S when he saw a figure on the level ahead of him — a horse and rider, distinct in the growing daylight. He drove Midnight ahead at a faster pace, and when he came up to the other he saw the rider was the Mexican woman who worked for Seddon.

The woman had seen him coming, and she wheeled her

horse to face him as Midnight plunged up, snorting with impatience.

"*Bueno dias!*" she exclaimed, when she recognized Rand. "You hurry. Miz' Seddon in heap trouble. I send theeze man — Larry — to help. Other men come — I see — fi' — ten — fifteen minutes ago. You hurry, *amigo!*"

That explained the tracks leading to the Bar S. One of the robbers had taken this trail; it had led him to the Bar S, and he had attacked Eleanor.

Midnight ran, now. For the man on his back was using his spurs as he had never used them before; and Midnight, stung to desperation by the biting steel, tried his best to meet the demands his master was imposing upon him.

The Bar S seemed to be deserted when Rand arrived. When Midnight came to a sliding halt near the door that opened into Seddon's office, there was not a person in sight.

Rand leaped from Midnight, drew one of his guns as he ran to the door, bounded inside and halted, drawing a shrill, amazed breath and standing, rigid for an instant, his face going chalk white as he looked at the upturned face of his friend, the lips in a satisfied half-smile.

Rand saw Seddon, too; but it was at Larry's side that he knelt, the blood pounding at his temples; his breath lagging in his throat; his brain afire, reeling — for the

first time entirely in the grip of that terrible lust that he had fought all his days.

Had Compton, Kinney, and Morgan chanced upon him now, they might have killed him without risk to themselves. For his head was bowed as he knelt beside Larry; and he saw nothing but the pallid face of his friend, the slight smile on the lips.

"Damn them, Larry!" he said, in a dry, light voice. "Damn them — they've killed you, they've killed you!"

Compton, Kinney, and Morgan did not come to kill Rand, because at that moment — and for several minutes before the arrival of Rand, they were intensely occupied elsewhere.

When Compton carried Eleanor out of the office after he had shot Larry, he went directly to his horse. Kinney and Morgan had gone out some time before to leave Compton alone with the girl; and when Compton carried Eleanor out, the two men were watering their horses near the windmill.

Compton was forced to set Eleanor down for an instant while he tightened a loose cinch; and the girl, passive enough until that instant, broke from his grasp and ran toward Silver.

She was halfway in the saddle when Compton reached her; but the gray horse was already on the run and Comp-

ton could not catch him. He yelled to the other men, and they clambered on their horses and raced after the gray.

Compton, too, mounted and rode recklessly, in pursuit.

The girl, though, intensely excited, did not escape. She sent Silver around the stable, intending to ride to the Three Bar, where she supposed Rand to be; but when Silver dashed around the stable he ran directly into Morgan and Kinney — who had ridden around the other way to intercept her.

Before she could maneuver Silver to get him into his stride on a straightaway run, Morgan's horse had lurched into the gray, and Morgan's hand was at the gray's bridle.

She fought hard to escape, even then — kicking at the men as they dragged her from the saddle; scratching Morgan's face until the man cursed her viciously. But in the end she was again in Compton's arms, with his gloating, triumphant eyes looking into hers, and his lips wreathed in a mocking smile.

Then she heard a shout; felt Compton straighten and stiffen; saw Morgan and Kinney start and look toward the river trail.

She looked, too; and she saw Moggs and his men not more than a hundred yards away, just topping a rise which had concealed them from view as they were riding toward the stable.

There were twenty men in the Moggs posse; and when they rode up to where Compton, Kinney, and Morgan were standing — Compton's arms still around the girl — their faces were set with sullen inquiry.

Moggs was the leader; he dismounted near Compton and the girl and said, gruffly:

"What's happened here, Compton? What does this mean?"

Before Compton could reply Eleanor wrenched herself free and grasped Moggs frantically by the arms and told him what had happened.

Moggs' face whitened; there were low mutterings of rage from the other men of the posse. For these men were recruited from the best type of Ocate's inhabitants and few of them admired Compton and his two friends.

"We'll see about this!" declared Moggs. "You two guys get off your horses and toddle along ahead of us. There's a hell of a lot of things that have got to be explained about last night's work!"

Sullenly, Compton, Kinney, and Morgan dismounted. Three men of the posse took charge of the animals, and the group moved forward — turning a corner of the stable and proceeding slowly toward the ranchhouse.

They had almost reached the latter — Compton, Kinney, and Morgan in the lead; with Compton smiling smoothly because he had nothing to fear from the posse.

having completely enmeshed Rand — when as though prearrangement every man in the group halted, looking tently forward, their faces paling, their eyes wide with nazement.

For in the office doorway — his face dead white; his es blazing with a cold, wanton light; a heavy pistol in ch hand — was Rand.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE GRIM ACCOUNTING

THOUGH Moggs and the men of his posse had bee at the Three Bar—there finding the evidence o Rand's guilt in the shape of a canvas bag filled with gol dust belonging to the express company; finding also, th black mask mentioned by Val Davis—Moggs and hi men made no hostile move when they saw Rand standin in the office doorway.

They wanted Rand—they had thought they wer determined to take him; but in their hearts and in thei minds at this minute had grown a mighty indecision.

There were men in the group who looked furtively a one another; there were those who kept their gaze upo Rand, their eyes glowing with wonder and dread; ther were others who looked downward quickly after one flash ing glance at the man, yielding to the paralysis of drea that had seized them.

Moggs, a brave man, thrilled with queer emotion as h watched Rand. A wave of cold, clammy perspiratio ran over Morgan, a mirthless, sneering smirk wreathe Kinney's lips; Compton, pale and silent, seemed fascinate by what he saw in Rand.

For it was not the Rand these men knew who faced hem now. That reluctance which they had all seen in im; the atmosphere of repression that always had eemed to surround him, hinting of passions controlled or ormant — that something in him which had made men esitate to do violence in his presence; the lingering threat f his manner; the sinister, suppressed, destructive npulses which had made him a puzzle to all men — all iese were no more.

In the Rand that watched them now was no indecision; iere was no evidence of conflict of passion in his eyes, i his manner, or in his movements. There was nothing ut implacable determination and the wanton will to kill.

They all saw it — it was unmistakable, conclusive. It as the only thought in his brain; the one certain passion f his mind — irrevocable, absolute.

While one might have counted one hundred the scene eld. Then lungs sighed in process of deflation — indiating that all had forgotten to breathe — and the men egan to slip sidewise — away from the line of Rand's sion, which seemed to be centered upon Compton, Kiney, and Morgan.

Eleanor, like the others, had been held in the clutch of read and wonder that had gripped them all. She was azed; she seemed to hear someone speaking to her — it as Moggs, and he was repeating over and over:

"Move to one side, move to one side—" insistentl softly. And then she felt his hand on her arm, tuggi hard at it, and she felt herself moving as the others move out of the line of Rand's vision—away from Compto Kinney, and Morgan.

"He's after Compton, Kinney, and Morgan," the g heard Moggs saying; "God! Isn't he terrible!"

Cold, alert, moving as a panther moves, with smoot flowing undulations, Rand stepped down from the thres old of the doorway and made his way to within twent five or thirty feet of the three men of the Two Link.

There he stopped and stood looking at them; and t cold, yellow flame in his eyes danced like the glare of winter sun on ice.

Inside the office, kneeling over the body of his frie Rand had caught the whispered word—repeated seve times—through the stiffening lips:

"Compton."

Larry had seemed to know that Rand was kneeli over him; he had seemed to know that Rand wou avenge him; and he was trying to tell Rand so the would be no mistake.

And, kneeling there, Rand had answered his whis with:

"I'll get him, Larry."

But when he had stood in the doorway just an inst

efore, and had seen the two men who were with Comp-
on, he knew that all of them had been concerned with
ie shooting of Larry. And he had determined that all
ust pay the penalty.

Facing them now, with only the few feet of space inter-
ening, he laughed lowly, without mirth, without expres-
on.

"You sneakin' coyotes are goin' to die." There was
tter sarcasm in his voice as he continued:

"I've got my guns out — an' so there ain't a chance for
ou if you draw one at a time. But there's a big chance if
ou all sling your guns together. You could all think
gether when you framed up on Larry. You didn't give
m a chance — you were afraid. You shot him down
ke a dog. Flash your guns, you whelps — for I'm
ootin' — now!"

No doubt the three men strove for concerted action.
hat thought was in the brain of each man — Rand saw
in their quickened eyes; he detected the thought before
eir muscles leaped to do the will of their minds.

The irony of it, though, was apparent to many of the
en who watched. For Rand had set them an impossible
sk.

Kinney, his gun hand trained to the sensitive impulses
his trade, was the first to draw his pistol. His hand
oved like a streak of light — downward, then upward

with the same motion. But his fingers were already loosening when he pulled the trigger; and while he was toppling forward, to lurch heavily into the dust after his weapon, Rand's pistols were flaming death to the others.

Morgan drew second, a flashing instant in advance of Compton; but Morgan's gun went off before he could throw its muzzle to a level — a spasmodic movement caused by the shock of Rand's bullet striking him. Several bullets were reserved for Compton — for Rand's gun belched flame in a continuous streak as the big man crumpled and sank in his tracks.

The silence which followed the shooting endured long. Through it Rand stood, his chin on his chest, looking down at the bodies of his fallen enemies.

He shuddered as he watched them; muttered:

"I reckon that's all, Larry," and turned, not seeming to know or care that there were other men near him — striding slowly back into the office, where he again knelt beside the body of his friend.

Outside, Moggs, a pale, strained expression in his eyes, said, hoarsely, to Eleanor:

"Yes, I reckon that *is* all. I hate to do it — and I reckon there'll be more hell to pay. But I've got to take him for robbing the stage."

"Who?" demanded Eleanor, startled, Moggs' words stirring her from the depths of horror into which the

hooting had plunged her. "Take whom?" she emanded.

"Rand," said Moggs, "there's evidence that he done ."

Eleanor laughed, the hysteria of eagerness in her voice. he was stunned with the weight of the tragic events that ad descended upon her during the past few hours; she as frantic with grief over the death of her father — but ie had seen, and she had meant to save Rand from becom- ig the victim of Compton's plot. She looked at Moggs ith the truth in her eyes.

And after she had told him and the others who crowded round her what had happened — what she had seen at ie Red Buttes — and she saw that they were not quite onvinced, she looked around wildly until her gaze rested pon Morgan's black horse, which Compton had ridden ie night before, and which had carried him to the Bar S.

She saw the dull white spots on the black — the grayish emnants of that which had once been white — staining ie black hair of the animal — the oval above the left oreleg, and the spot on the right hip.

"There! There!" she cried. "Don't you see?"

And when Moggs and the others had examined the ots on the black horse, and had led Midnight beside the her so that they might compare them, the girl declared iumphantly:

"Oh, don't you see? If you doubt Rand you are fools!"

They did not doubt long; for they nodded to each other and smiled, and several of them said: "We might have knowed it."

And the girl, hearing them and seeing their nods, reflected as she went toward the office that she had doubted him longer — and with less cause. But, she told herself, as she looked into the office, and with streaming eyes was led away again by some men of the posse, she would never doubt him again.

It seemed, some time later, when she was sitting on the front porch staring mutely into the shimmering glare of the morning sun, that a whisper floated to her on the slight breeze.

"Your father will live," said the whisper. And she looked around to see Rand standing near her, an odd light in his eyes.

"Larry, too," he added, "he wasn't hurt bad. Nor your father. The doc. has been with them for a little while — he's goin' to stay until they both get out of danger."

She made him say it again — all of it. And then she got up and stood beside him, saying nothing. And for a long time they stood on the porch, close together, their eyes on the broad plains stretching before them, and upon

the endless miles of glowing sunshine that was rapidly banishing the shadows of the night.

And the men of the posse, seeing them there, smiled understandingly and passed on, to nod and to whisper of those things that all men know.

CHAPTER XXXVI

IN PATHS OF PEACE

A MONTH later two convalescents were lounging in big easy chairs on the porch of the Bar S ranch-house. Both convalescents were thin, looking as though the margin between life and death for them had been very narrow; but both were cheerful—and the grins with which they watched three persons coming toward them were broad, expansive grins, pregnant with satisfaction. Peace, of a kind that the Bar S had not known for many days had settled over the ranchhouse and all felt that it was good.

However, only two of the three were walking; the other, much smaller in stature, was being carried. He was perched upon the hands of the other two—upon crossed hands that formed a square made by gripping wrists. The three were yet a great distance off.

"Larry," said one convalescent, "she likes the durned little cuss!"

"Sure," said Larry. "Seddon," he added, eyeing the other steadily, "you're a damned crank about that boy. You spend half your time ravin' about him, an' the other half wonderin' if Eleanor an' Rand like him. Look at

em!" he sneered. "Carryin' the little sucker on their ıands, an' Rand grinnin' all over like a tomcat!"

"Hush!" said Seddon in a low voice. "Don't ever say that where he can hear you. I called him that once — an' Ellie told him — before she knowed who he was."

"You don't say!" ejaculated Larry.

"I — I called him — worse," confessed Seddon.

"You don't say!"

"An' he wasn't," said Seddon.

"Wasn't what!"

"What I said."

"Of course not — he wasn't," agreed Larry.

"Wasn't what?" demanded Seddon.

"What you said," went on Larry. "He's worse — a vhole lot worse."

"Meanin'?"

"That he's a love-sick coyote!" declared Larry. "He goes around grinnin' an' slappin' folks on the back, an' howin' he's tickled clear down to his boots. He's changed nore'n any man I ever seen. He ain't full of them killin' treaks any more; he's softy an' gentle an' lovin' an' — aw, ell — he ain't! He's a damned lovable idiot!"

"Larry," said Seddon softly.

"Yep."

"Have a care! You're cussin' again, my boy."

"Well?"

"Rand never told you — did he?"

"Told me what?"

"That he taught Bud to cuss — just to get Ellie to come an' see him — over at his place?"

"The son-of-a-gun! He didn't!"

"He did!"

"The son-of-a-gun!" Larry grinned admiringly. "Well, what do you think of that!" he said. "An' did the little cuss do it?"

"Well, now," began Seddon, "he made a mighty good try at——"

But here were two men who were talking trivialities.

Rand and Eleanor and Bud were speaking with rare intelligence as they came toward the porch. The two "interested parties" did not seem to mind Bud's presence at all.

"I liked you the first time I saw you," confessed Eleanor, blushing.

Rand grinned. "I beat you to it. I loved *you* before I saw you. And," he added reprovingly, "I never stopped lovin' you!"

Bud saw a reproachful light in Eleanor's eyes as he looked up at her from his throne of hands. He thought he detected signs of storm in the love atmosphere.

"If you get mad at each other I'll cuss!" he threatened.

"We won't get mad," laughed Eleanor.

"Never?" questioned Bud, looking from one to the ther.

"Never!" both answered.

And Bud was borne to the porch in triumph.

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